

Students' Perceptions on Learning Writing Skills through Project-based Learning

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Abstract: This research is aimed at exploring students' perception on learning writing skills based on Project-based learning (PBL) method. The researcher applied descriptive research design for this study. A questionnaire was designed to find out the student's perception after they had been taught writing skills through PBL for a semester of 3.5 months. Thirty-five students in class 11 Mathematics at Ha Long high school for gifted students participated in the study. The result of this study showed that project-based learning provides immense opportunities for students to develop their writing skills. The students felt more confident in their ability to write, to work with others and to clearly communicate information. In addition, they enjoyed being an active participant in the learning process and assignments and activities in PBL were helpful. Findings from the study suggest that when guiding groups to implement projects, teachers need to make requirements on objectives, set of content-oriented commands, scale, implementation process and products of the project. The plans of the groups are discussed, unified with the teachers and recorded in each individual project. It is also necessary to ask students to clarify the benefits, difficulties encountered and remedies, new ideas for developing the project are born during the implementation of the project by the team.

Keywords: project-based learning, high school students, school for gifted students, writing skills, perceptions.

1. Introduction

In the context of the global integral era in the 21st century, which is the century of entering intellectual civilization with trends, which is the development of high technology, especially information and communication technology, knowledge economy, learning society...? The social development and renovation of the country are urgently required to improve the quality of education to meet the requirements of training highly qualified human resources. Students need to become labor who is comprehensively developed, have creative thinking, have good performance, are able to meet the increasing demands of employers during the period of accelerating industrialization - modernization associated with the development of globalization trend. To accomplish this task, education needs to be renovated. To achieve this, students should be fully developed when they are in school. Therefore, education needs to be constantly and comprehensively innovated in terms of purposes, content, and teaching methods. Orientation for innovation in teaching methods has been determined in Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW dated November 4, 2013, of the 8th Central Conference of the XI Session on a fundamental and comprehensive renovation of education. The Resolution specified the responsibilities of the education sector are to continue renovating strongly and synchronously the basic elements of education and pay more attention to develop learners' qualities and capacities. Currently, in Quang Ninh, it is challenging to innovate teaching methods. In many lessons, with traditional teaching methods, many teachers merely focus on imparting knowledge to students, but neglect the formation of methods and study skills for them. Meanwhile, human knowledge is exploding, the amount of knowledge they need to absorb is also increasing. Therefore, if students do not develop the necessary study skills, the acquisition of knowledge becomes overloaded and burdensome. In addition, the learning process of students is still theoretical, with little connection to reality. Students are rarely assigned exercises and homework related to reality. Learners have little opportunity to develop their writing abilities including descriptive essay through the process of scientific research, especially in the writing lessons of grade 11 students. Therefore, the formation and development of students' capacity through the use of active teaching methods is an important task to be solved by teachers and students in the process of learning writing skills.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Writing and the process of writing

Harmer (2007, p. 265) defined that “Productive skills are skills which enable students to produce language by themselves to which writing and speaking belong.” On the other side, learners must possess productive abilities in order to develop communication through the language. Because writing is a medium of communication and is seen as an indicator of communication competence of the target language, writing is a productive skill of the English language that English language learners need to acquire. Nunan (1999, p.275) stated that “A good writing skill represents learners’ ability in communicating through English. Written language is used to communicate with others who are removed in time and space.”

Furthermore, Harmer (2007, p.56) states that “Writing is the only skill which enables a learner to produce a real product, in which the product is touchable, readable, as well as keepable for a long time”. Depending on the readers’ needs, written language can be read again. According to Nunan (1999, p. 275), “People also need permanent records which could be referred to over and over again. Furthermore, written language tends to be more exact and precise rather than spoken language.” Therefore, it will not cause any confusion, misunderstanding, or misinterpretation to the readers. In this study, the author used Harmer’s writing skill definition.

In addition, Nunan (1999, p.273) states that “Writing process as a complex, cognitive process which requires sustained intellectual effort within a period of time.” Seow (2002, p.98) argues that “Writing process provides the learners with sequences of planned learning experiences to help them understand the nature of writing”. There are various steps that need to be taken into consideration in order to produce outstanding writing. These writing stages are interconnected, establishing a writing cycle where one step will affect the following stage. The further explanation of the writing process proposed by Seow (2002) may be described as follows:

Planning: At the stages of writing, planning can be referred to as the pre-writing activity. Pre-writing activity is any kind of activity that can stimulate students to start writing. Farrel (2006, p.58) stated that “The pre-writing stage concentrates on stimulating students’ creativity and letting them think about what they are going to write and how to approach the chosen topic”. This initial phase in the writing process is significant since it may aid students in coming up with ideas and gathering data for their writing. Giving pupils a variety of information-gathering options during the pre-writing exercise will motivate them to write.

Drafting: Harmer (2007, p.158) states that “Drafting is a form of raw writing which needs to be revised before the final product is completed.” The students focus on the flow of their writing during the drafting stage rather than giving their draughts an excessive amount of consideration to grammar and organisation. Students at this stage also need to focus on the content of their writing. As said by Farrel (2006, p.69) “students need to emphasize more on global issues, which are a topic, organization, and evidence, while ignoring surface problems, like spelling, punctuation, and wordiness.”

Revising: When making changes to their writing, students must go back and double-check what they have written to ensure that it effectively conveys their meanings to the readers. When revising, students should focus on the arrangement of their thoughts and content as well as any linguistic faults.

Editing: The editing stage is the stage in which the students put their pieces of writing into the final form (Farrel, 2006). Ferris (2002) also states that the editing process refers to correcting grammatical, lexical, and mechanical errors, before turning in the final product of writing. The final version of their writing should be polished at this point so that it is ready for the teacher to grade. They must focus on their accuracy, diction, punctuation, grammar, and other writing skills.

2.2 Project-based Learning and its characteristics

According to Soloman (2003), Project-based learning is considered a teaching method when people are interested in project-based solutions, such as learners recognize the project, develop a plan for the project., collect data, process data, summarize and present products. With project-based learning, learners directly implement the phases of the

learning project. It is teaching methods in which learners do not passively receive knowledge from the teacher but actively explore and discover the necessary knowledge through practical tasks related to the lesson.

Nicola & Alison (2014) mentioned five characteristics of project-based learning: Student-oriented, Practice-oriented, Product-oriented, Activity-oriented, Complexity as follows:

Student-oriented: Learners are at the heart of project-based teaching tailored to the individual's abilities and interests. Project-based learning is an important teaching method to implement a student-centered teaching approach. Learners participate actively and self-reliantly in all stages of the teaching process, from goal setting and planning to project implementation, checking, adjusting, and evaluating process and actual results. Presently Teachers mainly play the role of advising, guiding, helping, and encouraging students' positivity, self-reliance, responsibility, and creativity. Learners not only listen, remember, repeat but also need to collect information from many different sources and then analyze, synthesize, evaluate and draw knowledge for themselves. Learners not only acquire knowledge about facts, but also apply theory to practice, practice problem-solving skills.

Practice-oriented: The project theme comes from the situation of professional practice, social life, suitable to the curriculum. learner level. Projects that link learning in school with the realities of social, local, and environmental life bring positive social impacts. Through this, learners test, consolidate and expand theoretical understanding as well as practice action skills and practical experience.

Product-oriented: During the implementation of a project, people care a lot about the products created. The product can be physical, or immaterial, a blueprint or a plan. The products are not only purely theoretical, but in most cases, projects also produce social material products. To have a good student-made product, the teacher must skillfully adjust the project so that the product of the project is the result of doing a real job, not just a presentation of information collected. Teachers together with learners evaluate the product based on the practicality, usefulness of the product and the working combination of the team members. Products that bring many benefits to society are often appreciated. They can be published, widely introduced, and put into practice.

Activity-oriented: Students must combine theory and practice, mobilize all senses and directly participate in activities and create products of the project.

Complexity: The project content combines knowledge from many different fields or disciplines to solve a complex problem.

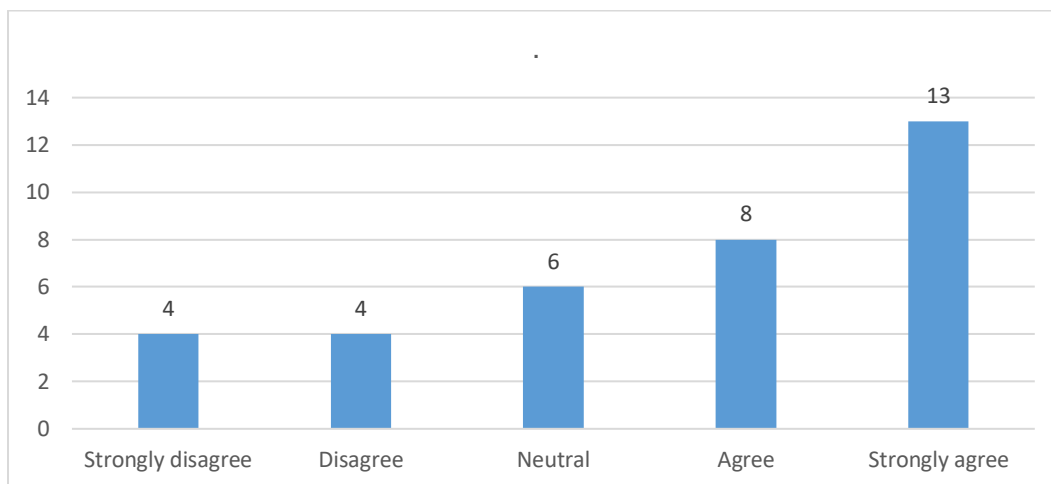
3. Methodology

The main objective of conducting this research is to find out the students' perception of writing skills based on PBL method in the learning process. The researcher applied descriptive research as Fox & Bayat (2007, p.45) states "descriptive studies may be characterised as simply the attempt to determine, describe or identify what is, while analytical research attempts to establish why it is that way or how it came to be". Thirty-five students in class 11 Mathematics (school year 2021-2022) at Ha Long high school for gifted students participated in the study. Particularly the researcher used a questionnaire as instruments of the research. Likert-Scale was used to measure the data from the questionnaire of students' perception. Data obtained from the questionnaire was then calculated (percentage and mean score) and presented in figures and tables.

4. Results and Discussion

Students' perception of course structure was quite positive as few students disagree that the unit assignments and activities were helpful. The result was shown as the figure 1 below:

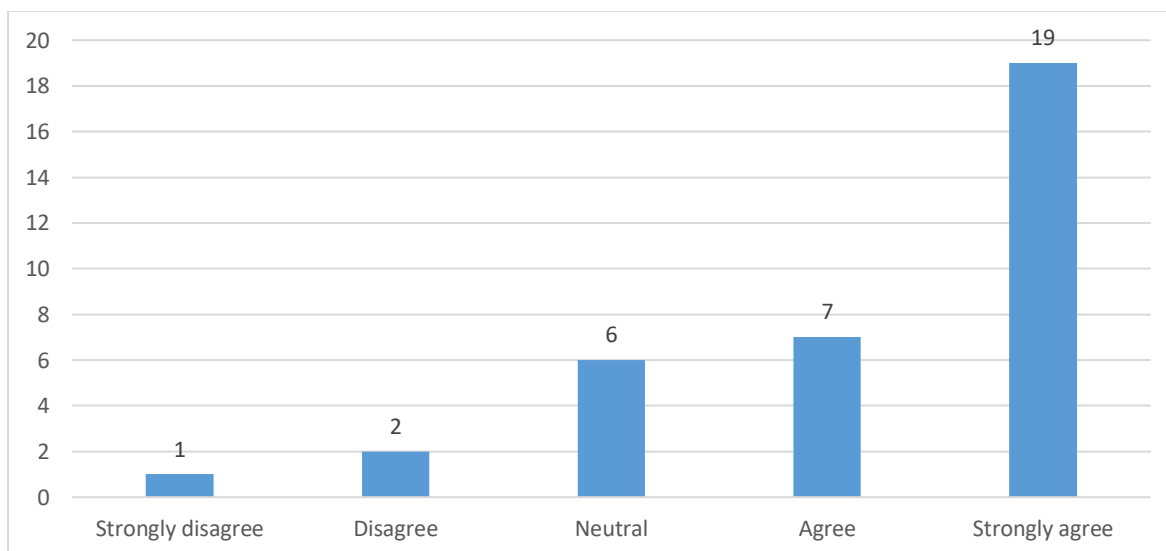
Figure 1. The unit assignments and activities were helpful



As shown in the figure, the unit assignments and activities were helpful. Eight students disagreed that the unit assignments and activities were helpful. Moreover, more than 20 students claimed that the unit assignments and activities were helpful. There were only 6 students said that they did not know whether the unit assignments and activities were helpful. The reason was given that they did not make many efforts to complete the assignments and activities when the teacher distributed the tasks in each lesson.

Moreover, the author explored the willingness of students to take part in class activities. The result was shown in Figure 2 as follows:

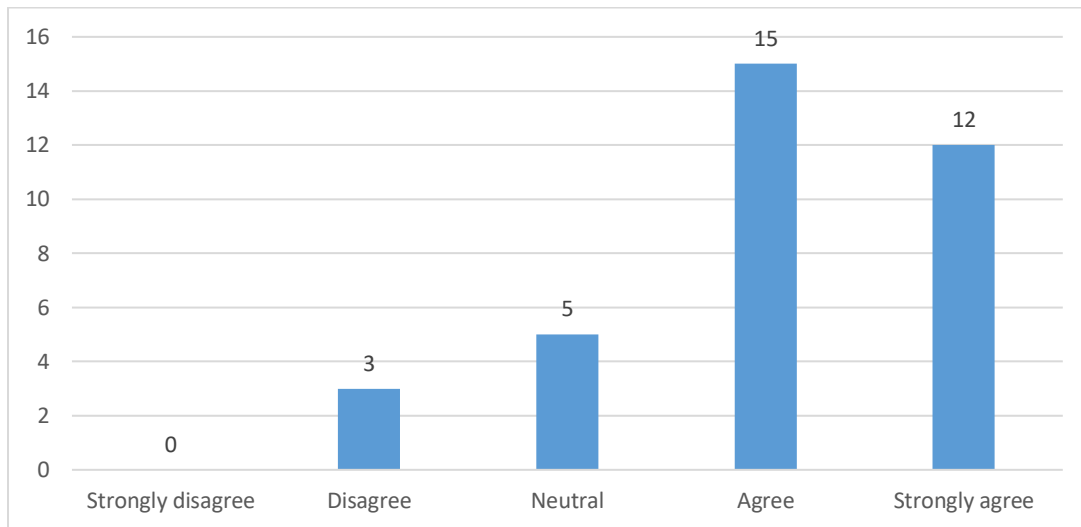
Figure 2. I enjoyed being an active participant in the learning process.



Regarding the willingness of students to take part in class activities, students show positive attitude to the item that students enjoyed being an active participant in the learning process. Only three students disagreed that they enjoyed being an active participant in the learning process. Specifically, 80% of the students claimed that they enjoyed being an active participant in the learning process. There were 6 students told that they did not know whether they enjoyed being an active participant or not in the learning process.

Furthermore, the author investigated the confidence of students in writing tasks and group work activities. The result was shown in Figure 3 as follows:

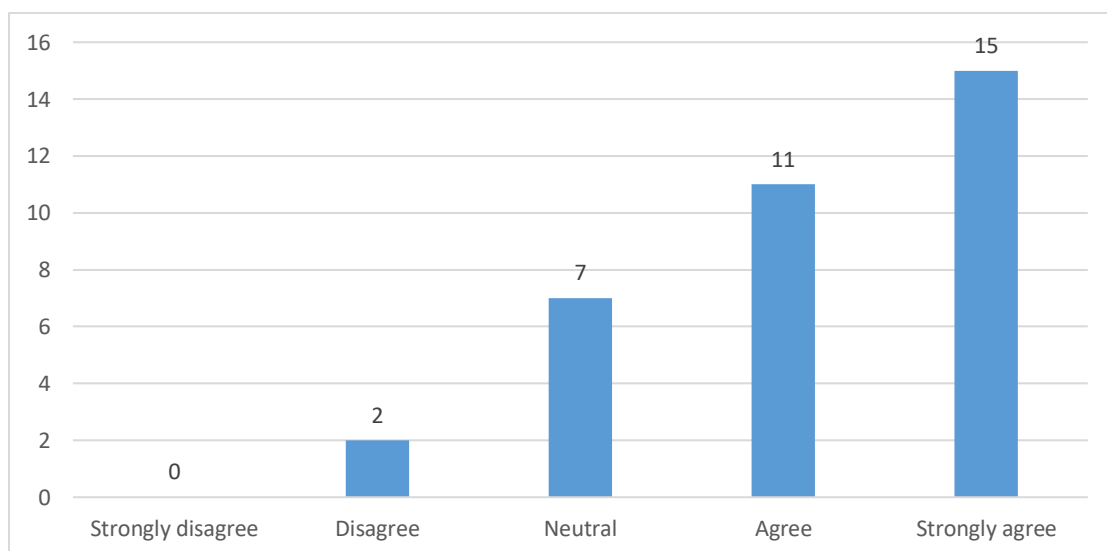
Figure 3. I feel more confident in my ability to write, to work with others and to clearly communicate information.



As can be seen in figure 3, students’ attitude to the item “I feel more confident in my ability to write, to work with others and to clearly communicate information.” was positive. There were only 3 students disagreed that they felt more confident in my ability to write, to work with others and to clearly communicate information meanwhile 5 of the students told that they did not know whether they felt more confident in my ability to write, to work with others and to clearly communicate information. More than 80% of the students felt more confident in my ability to write, to work with others and to clearly communicate information.

In addition, the author researched on the perception of students of the contribution of Project Based Learning in this course to another courses. The result was presented in Figure 4 bellows:

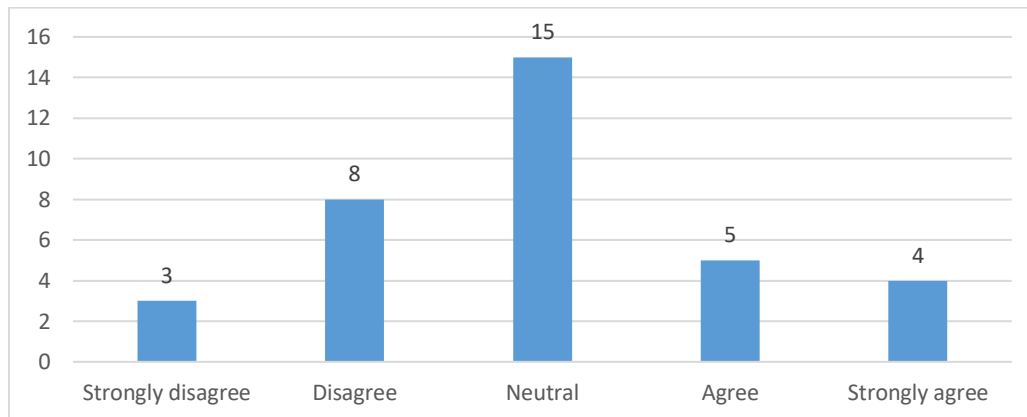
Figure 4. I will definitely use the skills gained in this course in my future courses.



As it can be seen from the figure, students thought that they would use the skills gained in this course in their future courses. Only two students claimed that they would not use the skills gained in this course in their future courses. Moreover, more than 20 students claimed that they would use the skills gained in this course in their future courses. There were only 7 students said that they did not know whether they would use the skills gained in this course in their future courses. The reason was given that they did not determine their aims in their studies and they would not go to study English in their further study such as in universities.

Furthermore, the author studied the perception of students of the contribution of Project Based Learning in this course to their success. The result was presented in Figure 5 as follows:

Figure 5. The structure of this course contributed to my success.



As shown in the figure, students thought that the structure of this course - the applying of Project Based Learning contributed to their success. Nearly 10 students claimed that the applying of Project Based Learning contributed to their success. Moreover, more than 10 students claimed that the applying of Project Based Learning would not contribute to their success. Surprisingly, 15 students, which is the largest group of students in the class, said that they did not know whether the applying of Project Based Learning contributed to their success. The reason was given that students have not determine the purposes in further study or career path when they were studying high school.

Regarding students’ perception of writing skills improvement through Project-based Learning, in view of this current situation, project-based learning provides immense opportunities for students to develop their writng skills as shown in the following table:

Table 1. Students’ perceptions of writing skill improvement

Statements	Mean	SD	Ranking
I learn to write descriptive essay effectively.	4.05	0.80	2
I managed a writing task I received related to the project assigned well.	4.00	0.84	4
I become familiar with the writing format and style of descriptive essay.	3.94	0.79	5
I lean to organize ideas when preparing and writing the project report and descriptive essay.	4.09	0.81	1
I learn how to write reports in a form of descriptive writing based on the findings.	4.01	0.84	3
Mean	4.02		

Mean scores for all statements in this were all high, ranging from M=3.94 (i.e., becoming familiar with with the writing format and style of descriptive essay) to M=4.09 (i.e., organizing ideas when preparing and writing the project reports in a form of descriptive writing based on the findings). Actually, “becoming familiar with the writing format and style of descriptive essay” was the only statement that received a mean score under 4.0 in this scale (M=3.94; SD=0.84).

Based on the results, it can be seen that Project Based Learning improved students’ ability to write descriptive text. The result of this study was also similar to the result of some previous studies. Firstly, the result of the study by Barak (2012) was similar to the result of this study which also proven that the implementation of PBL was proved

to be significant to improve the students' writing skills. PBL offered a succession of difficult, energising, and stimulating tasks that change up the activities during the teaching-learning process. It increased the pupils' motivation and provided them with more chances to write.

Secondly, the result of the study by Kessler et al., (2012) also proven that students used the tool for a variety of objectives at the same time, paying more attention to meaning than form, participating intermittently, and generally making more accurate than inaccurate grammatical adjustments. Thirdly, the result of the study by Lou and Mac Gregor (2004) proven that provide some insights into the computer supported collaborative learning process among students in a higher education context.

Furthermore, the result of this study also confirms some theories and ideas from the experts. First, Project Based Learning approach fits the students' interests and abilities. This result was similar to the theory by Moursund (1998) who stated that through the construction of a personally-meaningful artifact, which may be a play, a multimedia presentation or a poem, learners represent what they've. In addition, when students have greater control over what they learn, interest is maintained and they are encouraged to take more ownership of their education.

Then, Project Based Learning helps the students to construct better knowledges and skills. This result was supported by Storch (2005) who said that students are then encouraged to use resources that go beyond textbooks, to work collaboratively, to think critically, creatively and independently and to communicate their findings. This will help students to construct a better knowledge and skills. Furthermore, it is an authentic form of learning, which prepares our students for increasing demands of the workplace.

5. Conclusion

Students at grade 11 Maths in Ha Long high school for gifted students have positive perceptions of learning writing skills based on PBL. All the PBL assignments and activities were helpful in their writing process. Students would use the skills gained in this course in their future courses. Project-based learning provides immense opportunities for students to develop their writing skills. The students felt more confident in their ability to write, to work with others and to clearly communicate information. In addition, they enjoyed being an active participant in the learning process and assignments and activities in PBL were helpful.

Based on the findings of the study, some recommendations were given as follows:

When guiding groups to implement projects, teachers need to make requirements on objectives, set of content-oriented commands, scale, implementation process and products of the project. The plans of the groups are discussed, unified with the teacher and recorded in each individual project. Education directs the student's method of finding the information and materials required to perform. At the same time, they agree to educate students on the presentation of the product, the time of the project, and the clear and specific plan, criteria, and assessment method for the product and the results of the project implementation. Quality research projects, implements or quality tool production can be carried out as the student progresses through the study of the substance. The groups that choose this project will present their work instead of the teacher presenting the content.

Each group of students in a semester should only work on one project on an extended content lesson as a type of homework assignment and one medium project Study part of the lesson content have a growing requirement with knowledge. Teachers should pay attention to help students develop their critical thinking

In the product report, it is necessary to ask students to clarify the benefits, difficulties encountered and remedies, new ideas for developing the project are born during the implementation of the project by the team.

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