

## PROJECT-BASED LEARNING AND ITS EFFECTS ON DEVELOPING WRITING SKILLS IN BUSINESS ENGLISH STUDENTS

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**Abstract:** Nowadays probably more than ever, communication has reached an unprecedented level. Regardless the shape of it, face to face or written, communication seems to be the key to success in every domain of activity. Businesses want to go global and employers look for employees who master communication skills in English, especially writing skills since every company wants to convey its idea, message, concept to employees, partners, contractors all over the world. Business English writing is a compulsory skill to be mastered by Business English students, yet there is little progress in acquiring writing skills perhaps because it is perceived as being unattractive. Students perceive writing tasks as difficult ones as writing itself is a difficult skill to master. It is argued that project-based learning seems to be the solution to the problem. The present study wants to discuss the effect of Project-Based learning on developing writing skills for students at the University of Oradea, Faculty of Economics and their perception of Project-Based learning in Business English. It is based on mixed-methods research including a systematic literature review and semi-structured interviews, in the qualitative phase, as an instrument for data collection, aiming to find out the students' perspective towards the use of Project-Based methods in developing writing skills in Business English. The sample of the study consists of 50 students at the Faculty of Economic Sciences, University of Oradea, first and second year of Bachelor's Degree. The students have been asked 5 questions on their opinions towards Project-Based learning in Business English. The results show that students perceive Project-Based learning as a great tool for improving their writing skills, favoring the improvement in vocabulary, organization of material, grammar and content writing. Project-Based learning enhances the students' critical thinking and creative thinking along with vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. Project-Based learning also proved to be a motivator for learners to engage in writing as they had become accustomed to individual learning environments where active participation is needed, in all stages of the process, to avoid falling behind. In order to gain a deeper and broader comprehension of the effects of project-based learning, on students' writing skills, further studies will be done.

**Key words:** writing skills; educational technology; Business English; blended learning.

**Jel codes:** Z13; Q55; L81.

## 1. Introduction

We live in a fast-paced world, where information is power. Whether we like it or not, the rapid development of technology has shown us that, no matter how we improve in different domains of our lives, things change rapidly and the only solution at hand is to keep the pace. The importance of English is absolutely obvious in today's world. English is used around the world by people in different countries, as a means of cross-cultural communication, being a global language. There are over one billion of English language speakers around the world and the number increases every day, being the language of social, political, business, education, industry and media context. In this general landscape, the current foreign language education must be focused on language production, meaning that teachers must develop the students' ability for communication regardless the form of it, oral or written. Writing is a compulsory skill, being considered one of the basic yet complicated language skills to be mastered by Business English students. Swandi & Netto-Shek (2016, p.1) claim that *'Writing ability is defined as an essential ability for students to master for academic purposes and as a work and life skill.'* Unfortunately, although writing is an ability that the students must master, writing has been neglected for a long time in comparison with other skills, being considered uninteresting and difficult to students. The writing ability is a complex cognitive activity which encompasses a lot of variables simultaneously. In writing, grammar must be used correctly: the use of appropriate tenses, the subject-verb agreement, the appropriate modal auxiliary and the active-passive sentences. Vocabulary is another essential aspect that should be considered when talking about writing ability. Lack of vocabulary and failure in selecting the appropriate word create difficulty in conveying a message, therefore, difficulty to be understood by the reader. Generating an idea with little vocabulary can be difficult; the time needed to create a few sentences can be too long, thus the construction of a paragraph is practically impossible. According to Palmer in Matthews et al., (185, 9.135), *'organizational skills concern how information is organized into paragraphs and texts by sequencing ideas rejecting irrelevant information and summarizing relevant points.'* Thus, writing is considered to be a rather complicated language skill to be mastered, especially for Business English students, implying correct and accurate language usage, correct text layout, accurate writing strategy and good critical thinking. Being a cognitive domain-based skill, writing involves learning, comprehension, application and synthesis of newly acquired knowledge. Therefore, the process of writing involves two approaches: the product approach (when the students are expected to analyze the text only, in terms of language used and the process approach which is an activity of looking at what people do when they compose written texts. Thus, when talking about writing, we need to think of a complex process in which students should become proficient.

## 2. Literature review

Writing is a complex process, an active involvement of cognitive competence, expressing the author's desire, being an active process, as the students have to

accumulate their desire and meaning of a topic within their brain and transfer the ideas and meanings into another language. The main concern is about organization, coherence and cohesiveness of the message they want to write. Adequate knowledge, proper writing convention, qualified content and punctuation are the key elements for performing a good writing. Being an authentic and unique assessment, writing is a language competence where students apply their understanding and language style. The construction of words carries the writer's ideas, thoughts and opinions. Hedge (2005, p.5) says that *'Since it involves two-ways communication, writing demands a logical, comprehensive, and clear delivery so it does not mislead understanding.'* When we talk about Business English, writing is a high-demand skill, having essential elements such as report writing, emails, resumes, and business communication (internal and external). In this context, Mali (2021, p.7) argues that *'Project-Based learning is an effective strategy in an educational context to enhance the students' writing skill considering the various challenges faced by the students in developing the skill. Project-Based learning could improve the students' communicative, cooperative, and creative skills.'* Moreover, being a process and product-oriented approach, Project-Based learning gives the students the opportunity to develop several skills, by motivating, challenging, and empowering them with self-confidence, strong self-esteem and autonomy. Recent studies show that projects in developing writing skills in Business English represent opportunities for experiential learning where the students can create knowledge on existing knowledge, by creating new experiences. Being a very useful tool, mobilizing students to acquire new knowledge, Project-Based learning also develops the personal features of the students; there is a strong connection between students' engagement in the project and the learning outcome. Capek (2019, p.3) claim that *'Project-Based learning is considered a highly effective way of education; the fundament of Project-Based learning is the correct idea that students should not learn abstract definitions but rather they should learn by solving complex projects.'* Project-Based learning is regarded as a learning model, based on the 21<sup>st</sup> century constructivist learning theory, according to which students' learning occurs when the new knowledge is presented in relation to the previous knowledge, in an effective teaching environment. According to recent studies, the newly acquired knowledge is connected to experiences, the students practicing through their personal experience, having active participation during the process of learning. The simplest definition of Project-Based learning presents it as a learning model that focuses on activities which attempt to produce learning through project works. It is potentially promoting the four concepts that support the 21<sup>st</sup> century education, the Four Cs: communication, critical thinking and problem solving, creativity and innovation and collaboration. Project-Based learning allows students to work together which leads to a development of language skills, communicative competence and increased confidence, cooperation and self-discipline. Moss & Van Duzer (2017, p.1) define Project-Based learning as *'an instructional approach that contextualizes learning by presenting learners with problems to solve or products to develop.'* It is a different approach in comparison with the traditional teaching methods as it emphasizes learning through students-centred, interdisciplinary, and integrated activities in real-world situations. Recent studies also show that Project-Based learning activities can be characterized as follows:

- student-centred, the teacher being a facilitator;
- allows the students to prove knowledge, by presenting an end product;
- focuses on content learning not on language patterns;
- integrates authentic language skills;
- creates a bridge between English in courses and real-life contexts.

Thus, being engaged in meaningful and interesting projects, students feel more motivated and willing to share ideas and interact with other students, being encouraged to work together and engage in more interactive and collaborative learning experiences. Recent studies show that platforms like Google Docs and Microsoft Word Online, facilitating real-time collaboration, enable students to work together on writing projects and providing direct feedback. According to Cong-Lem (2018, p.3) *'the use of blogs or websites for projects presentations, improves writing skills as well as introduces students to the genre of online writing and understanding a wider audience.'* On one hand, providing feedback to teammates leads to enriched writing skills through social interaction; on the other hand, it also improves information-finding, data-analysis and writing presentation skills.

Several research reported that the students involved in Project-Based learning, having technology integration, showed significant improvement regarding their writing abilities, fostering increased project engagement and improved writing skills.

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **3.1. Research Design**

In this paper, the selected approach is the qualitative type of study. Qualitative studies explore and provide a deeper insight into real-world problems, without collecting numerical data, helping to generate hypothesis which can be more rigorously tested with quantitative research for further research. The Concise Oxford Dictionary offers the following explanation (1998, p.1035) *'in qualitative studies the key concern understands the phenomenon of interest from the participants' perspective, finding out their opinions and feelings rather than information that can easily be shown in numbers'*. Qualitative research asks open-ended questions, uses techniques including structured and semi-structured interviews, focusing on groups. According to Sweeny, S. M. (2020, p.123) *'qualitative interview approaches to research can be stimulating and rewarding experiences for both researcher and participants'*.

#### **3.2. Sample of the Study**

This study has been conducted at the Faculty of Economic Sciences, University of Oradea, the sample being 50 students from the first year of our faculty (35 females and 15 males), all specializations of the faculty. The students' level in English is upper-intermediate. The first-year students in Economics, the study programs of Finances-Banks, Accounting, International Business, Marketing, Management and Economy of Commerce, Tourism and Services were the respondents to the five questions in the questionnaire.

### 3.3. Research Informants

In order to examine and get a clear image of developing writing skills in Project-Based learning, having clear reference to Business English, the study uses informants to offer an insider's perspective and in-depth information.

The following the inclusion criteria is used:

1. students in Economics who have English selection exam scores above 80 points;
2. students in Economics who have taken Introduction to Business English Course during the first semester.

### 3.4. Research Instruments

The instrument of this research is a semi-structured interview, containing five questions, regarding the students' experience and perspective on Project-Based learning in Business English. Thus, this study provided the students an opportunity to express their opinion in their own words.

### 3.5. Data Collection and Analysis

All interviews were conducted in English, being anonymous and written. The length was between 7 and 10 minutes. Each interviewee was asked questions regarding their personal experience on attending Project-Based learning courses.

**Table 1 (showing the characteristics of all the participants in the study)**

Characteristics	
Age	18-21 years old
Female/Male	35 Female, 15 Male
Educational Status	College students
Faculty	University of Oradea, Faculty of Economic Studies
Specialization	International Business – 15 students; Accounting – 10 students; Marketing – 5 students; Tourism – 5 students; Finance-Banks – 10 students; Management – 5 students.

**Source:** *Author*

The first-year students in Economics, the study programs of Finances-Banks, Accounting, International Business, Marketing, Management and Economy of Commerce, Tourism and Services were the respondents to the five questions in the questionnaire. The total number of respondents was 50 students and the representation of each study program is seen in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Number of respondents in each study programme

**Source:** own design on the basis of the data received from the respondent students

#### 4. Results and Findings

This section describes the questions and the answers of the undergone study. The study is based on answers to the following questions, given by the students:

Question 1: Did your writing skill develop during the Project-Based learning process?

Question 2: Do you consider Project-Based learning a useful tool in learning Business English?

Question 3: Do you think that Project-Based learning improves communication between students?

Question 4: Do you think that Project-Based learning is accessible to all the students?

Question 5: Do you consider that your Business English knowledge has improved during the process of doing the project?

**Table 1 (showing Q1 in the study)**

Q1: Did your writing skill develop during the Project-Based learning process?		
	YES	NO
International Business	15	0
Finance Banks	10	0
Tourism	3	2
Marketing	3	2
Accounting	8	2
Management	4	1

**Source:** own design on the basis of the data received from the respondent students

The results of the answers to question 1 are seen in the following figure:



**Figure 2.** Writing skills development during Project-Based learning

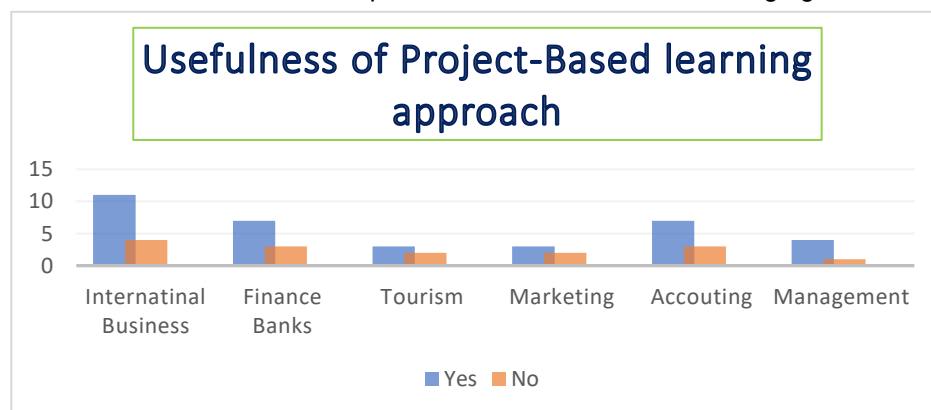
**Source:** own design on the basis of the data received from the respondent students

**Table 2 (showing Q2 in the study)**

Q2: Do you consider Project-Based learning a useful tool in learning Business English?		
	YES	NO
International Business	11	4
Finance Banks	7	3
Tourism	3	2
Marketing	3	2
Accounting	7	3
Management	4	1

**Source:** own design on the basis of the data received from the respondent students

The results of the answers to question 2 are seen in the following figure:



**Figure 3.** Usefulness of Project-Based learning approach

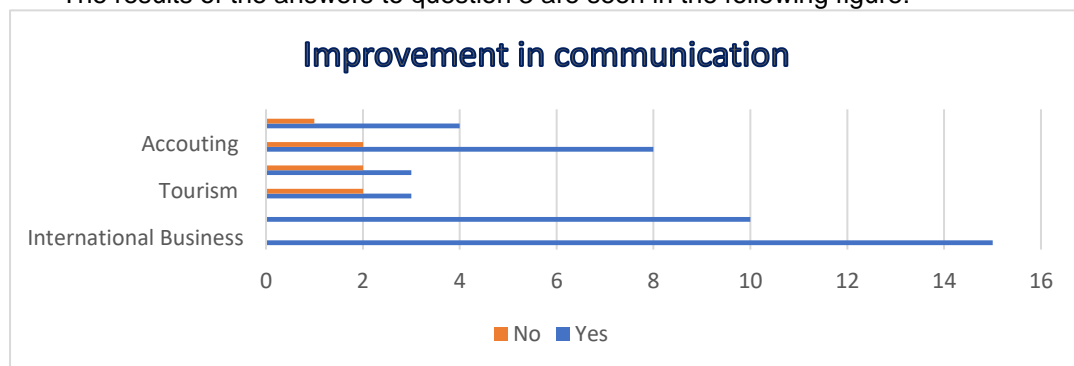
**Source:** own design on the basis of the data received from the respondent students

**Table 3 (showing Q3 in the study)**

<b>Q3: Do you think that Project-Based learning improves communication between students?</b>		
	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
International Business	15	0
Finance Banks	10	0
Tourism	3	2
Marketing	3	2
Accounting	8	2
Management	4	1

**Source:** own design on the basis of the data received from the respondent students

The results of the answers to question 3 are seen in the following figure:



**Figure 4.** Improvement in communication during Project-Based learning

**Source:** own design on the basis of the data received from the respondent students

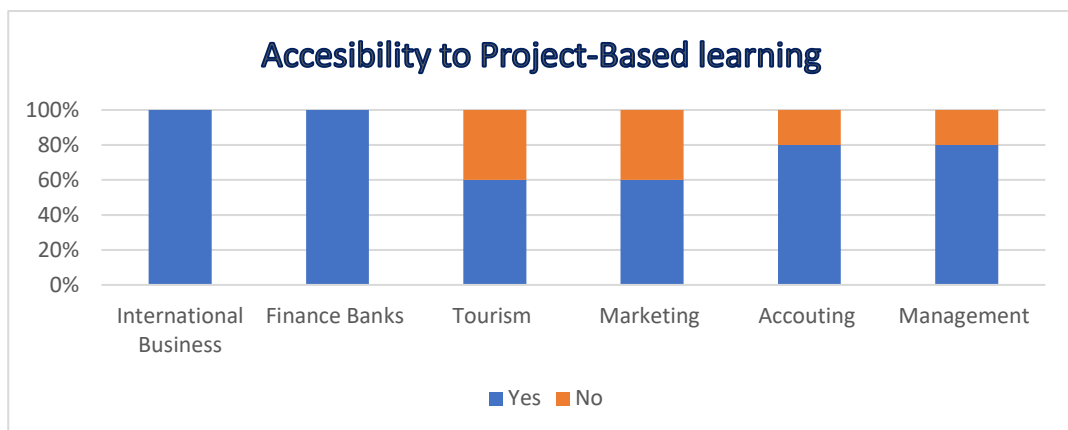
**Table 4 (showing Q4 in the study)**

<b>Q4: Do you think that Project-Based learning is accessible to all the students?</b>		
	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
International Business	15	0
Finance Banks	10	0
Tourism	3	2
Marketing	3	2
Accounting	8	2
Management	4	1

**Source:** own design on the basis of the data received from the respondent students

The results of the answers to question 4 are seen in the following figure:





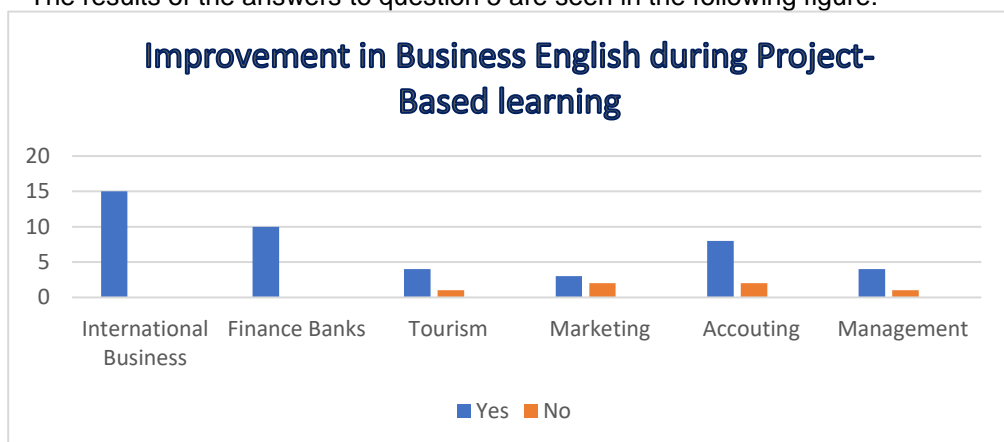
**Figure 5.** Accessibility to Project-Based learning

**Source:** own design on the basis of the data received from the respondent students

**Table 5 (showing Q5 in the study)**

Q5: Do you consider that your Business English knowledge has improved during the process of doing the project?		
	YES	NO
International Business	15	0
Finance Banks	10	0
Tourism	4	1
Marketing	3	2
Accounting	8	2
Management	4	1

The results of the answers to question 5 are seen in the following figure:



**Figure 6.** Improvement in Business English during Project-Based learning

**Source:** own design on the basis of the data received from the respondent students

## 6. Conclusions

Being a dynamic and student-centred approach, offering a series of significant advantages in the context of Business English learning, Project-Based learning relies heavily on real-world tasks, enhancing language proficiency and also cultivating essential workplace skills. Unlike the traditional methods where memorization prevails and practice is somehow isolated, this strategy proves to be effective and efficient for the students preparing for international careers. One of the most prominent benefits of Project-Based learning is that it encourages real-world communication, having real-world tasks, meaningful contexts such as writing emails, presenting business plans, negotiating with clients or participating in meetings. This is a contextualized practice which leads to more natural fluency, helping the students to internalize the structures and vocabulary of Business English through repeated use in practical situations. Moreover, Project-Based learning fosters a range of professional and soft skills: the students work in teams, take on specific roles, and manage deadlines, leading to the development of collaboration abilities, critical thinking and problem-solving. Nevertheless, Project-Based learning aligns closely with task-based language teaching, a method which is especially relevant for Business English. When being asked to complete authentic tasks, the students practice functional language such as making suggestions, agreeing or disagreeing, clarifying points and summarizing discussions. These tasks mirror the communication demands of today's workplace and help learners develop pragmatic competence. The motivational boost, coming from working with other students on challenging and relevant projects is another important benefit of this learning method. Seeing a clear purpose in their work, being the owners of the outcome, and the active participants in the project, the students pursue their own interest while applying language skills in a goal-driven context. Moreover, Project-Based learning proves to be an excellent tool to prepare the students for cross-cultural communication, by project which simulate intercultural scenarios. This way the students become aware of tone, formality, etiquette and other aspects that vary from culture to culture. By practicing this way, students avoid misunderstandings and build strong professional relationships at their future workplaces. Another key strength of Project-Based learning is the integration of digital tools when the students are encouraged to use modern platforms for presentation, communication and research. This is an important language development support but also an important factor for developing digital literacy and critical thinking in today's global workplace.

The results of this study of exploring students' perception towards the use of Project-Based learning are the following: The students at the Faculty of Economic Sciences, University of Oradea, first and second year of Bachelor's Degree, being asked 5 questions on their opinions towards Project-Based learning in Business English have given positive answers, considering this method as an effective and impactful approach in the context of Business English. As a result of the authentic, task-based nature of Project-Based learning method, as well as the engagement in real-life business scenarios, through the implementation of Project -Based learning, students have shown marked improvements in their writing skills, particularly in producing contextually-appropriate, coherent and purpose-driven texts relevant to

business environments. The practical application of writing conventions and language structures can definitely improve the students' writing skills. Moreover, the Project-Based learning has demonstrated its value in enhancing communication among students. Collaborative projects need constant exchange of ideas, interaction and negotiation, these elements leading to the development of the students' interpersonal and oral communication skills. The collaborative aspect of Project-Based learning leads to the development of some soft skills, such as problem-solving, leadership and teamwork, these being considered to be key competences in both professional and academic settings.

The results of the study also highlight the accessibility of Project-based learning. By allowing the students to contribute according to their strengths and encouraging diverse forms of attendance, Project-Based learning ensures inclusivity, by promoting a sense of belonging and motivation among students. Moreover, the flexible nature of Project-Based learning also supports differentiated learning and accommodates various levels of language proficiency. This method transforms the Business English course into a vibrant and practical learning environment, by integrating language, skills and real-world scenarios. Finally, the use of Project-Based learning has shown a significant development in the students' understanding of Business English concepts and terminology, as a result of their active engagement with meaningful context. This approach leads to a better retention of knowledge, making the entire process a more effective and enduring one, bridging the gap between theory and practice and making Business English more relevant and applicable to students' future professional endeavours.

This study confirms that Project-Based learning is not only a sound method for developing language skills but also a comprehensive educational strategy that supports the students' holistic development in Business English, equipping the students with the linguistic, cognitive and social tools necessary for success in global communication.

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