

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF USING PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING IN READING CLASS AT INDONESIAN ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRAK

Pemahaman membaca merupakan komponen fundamental dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris di tingkat perguruan tinggi. Namun, banyak mahasiswa masih menghadapi tantangan yang signifikan dalam memproses dan memahami teks akademik yang kompleks, yang menghambat kemajuan akademik mereka. Problem-Based Learning (PBL), sebuah pendekatan pedagogis yang berpusat pada siswa dan menekankan penyelidikan aktif, kolaborasi, serta pemecahan masalah dunia nyata, menawarkan metode alternatif untuk mendorong keterlibatan yang lebih mendalam dan meningkatkan pemahaman membaca. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi persepsi mahasiswa terhadap penerapan PBL dalam kelas membaca di sebuah universitas Islam di Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam semi-terstruktur dengan empat mahasiswa tahun kedua program studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris yang telah memiliki pengalaman belajar dengan metode PBL. Analisis tematik mengungkapkan bahwa mahasiswa secara umum memiliki pandangan positif terhadap PBL. Mereka melaporkan bahwa PBL secara efektif mendorong partisipasi aktif, meningkatkan pemahaman terhadap teks, serta memupuk motivasi belajar melalui tugas-tugas yang relevan dan bermakna. Kolaborasi dalam kelompok juga ditemukan mampu meningkatkan keterampilan komunikasi dan kerja sama tim mereka. Faktor-faktor pendukung yang diidentifikasi meliputi penggunaan materi bacaan yang otentik, kesempatan untuk berdiskusi dan refleksi, serta peran dosen sebagai fasilitator yang mendukung. Meskipun demikian, beberapa tantangan juga dicatat, seperti keterbatasan waktu belajar, kontribusi kelompok yang tidak merata, perbedaan kemampuan membaca antar anggota kelompok, dan kesulitan dalam memahami kosakata akademik. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa meskipun PBL efektif dalam meningkatkan pemahaman membaca dan mendorong pembelajaran yang berpusat pada siswa, penerapannya yang berhasil memerlukan perencanaan yang matang, strategi pendampingan (scaffolding), dan dukungan berkelanjutan dari dosen untuk mengatasi kendala yang ada.

Kata kunci: *Problem-Based Learning, pemahaman membaca, persepsi mahasiswa, pendidikan bahasa Inggris, pendidikan tinggi.*

ABSTRACT

Reading comprehension is a fundamental component of English language learning at the tertiary level. However, many students still face significant challenges in processing and understanding complex academic texts, which hinders their academic progress. Problem-Based Learning (PBL), a student-centered pedagogical approach that emphasizes active inquiry, collaboration, and real-world problem-solving, offers an alternative method to foster deeper engagement and enhance comprehension. This study explores students' perceptions of the implementation of PBL in reading classes at an Indonesian Islamic University. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with four second-year English Education students who had prior experience with PBL-based learning. Thematic analysis revealed that students generally hold a positive view of PBL. They reported that PBL effectively encourages active participation, improves text comprehension, and fosters learning motivation through relevant and meaningful tasks. Collaboration within groups was also found to enhance their communication and teamwork skills. Supporting factors identified include the use of authentic reading materials, opportunities for discussion and reflection, and the instructor's role as a supportive facilitator. Nonetheless, several challenges were also noted, such as limited learning time, uneven group contributions, varying reading abilities among group members, and difficulties in understanding academic vocabulary. The findings suggest that while PBL is effective in enhancing reading comprehension and promoting student-centered learning, its successful implementation requires careful planning, scaffolding strategies, and continuous support from instructors to overcome the identified constraints.

Keywords: *Problem-Based Learning, reading comprehension, student perceptions, English education, higher education*

I. INTRODUCTION

English is a global language used for communication across nations and cultures, playing a pivotal role in various fields such as international trade, politics, technology, and education. With the increasing need for global interaction, English has become a critical tool for acquiring knowledge and sharing ideas. It is an essential skill in the 21st century, where cross-border collaboration and information exchange are commonplace (Ilyosovna, 2024).

In Indonesia, English is recognized as the first foreign language and is formally taught from elementary through higher education. The government mandates English instruction in schools to prepare students for global competition. As part of curriculum reform, the 2013 Curriculum was introduced to support the development of critical thinking, creativity, and communication skills. It encourages educational practices that promote student-centered learning and real-world application of knowledge.

One of the core language skills emphasized in English language education is reading comprehension. Reading is not only crucial for understanding academic content but also serves as a foundation for other language skills. Academic reading, in particular, demands critical engagement with complex texts and is fundamental to university students' academic success (Rahmawati et al., 2024; Liu & Read, 2020).

To enhance reading comprehension, educators have explored various instructional approaches. Among these, Problem-Based Learning (PBL) stands out as a method that integrates inquiry, collaboration, and real-world problem solving. PBL is aligned with the goals of the 2013 Curriculum and aims to develop both cognitive and social skills. Research suggests that PBL enhances students' ability to think critically, work collaboratively, and engage more deeply with learning materials (Hidayati & Wagiran, 2020).

Despite its potential, there is limited empirical evidence on the effectiveness of PBL

in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), especially concerning reading comprehension. Most studies focus on PBL's impact on general academic performance rather than specific language skills. Furthermore, few investigations have examined how students perceive PBL and how it influences their motivation, engagement, and comprehension in English reading courses.

This study was conducted to fill that gap by investigating students' perceptions of Problem-Based Learning in English reading classes at the Indonesian Islamic University. The research focuses on how PBL supports reading comprehension and what factors contribute to its success or present challenges in an EFL setting. The study aims to contribute meaningful insights that can inform teaching practices and curriculum development in language education, particularly within higher education institutions in Indonesia.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in the English Education Study Program at an Indonesian Islamic University during the even semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. It employed a descriptive qualitative approach with the aim of gaining an in-depth understanding of students' perceptions of the implementation of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in enhancing their reading comprehension skills.

The research used a descriptive qualitative method, which, according to Creswell (2018), is intended to explore and interpret the meanings that individuals assign to their experiences and social phenomena. This approach is particularly suitable for investigating how students perceive PBL and how it affects their English reading comprehension. The methodology applied is grounded in the scientific characteristics of rationality (based on relevant theoretical logic), empiricism (based on field data obtained through interviews), and systematicity (following a structured research process). The

research seeks to produce contemporary and meaningful results within the context of foreign language learning.

The study was carried out at the English Education Department of an Indonesian Islamic University. The research subjects were second-year students who were considered to possess adequate foundational knowledge in English to participate in PBL-based reading classes. The population included all second-semester students in the program, while the sample was selected purposively, consisting of four students who were actively involved in PBL-oriented reading activities. The total sampling technique was applied to ensure comprehensive data collection from the most relevant participants.

Data collection was primarily conducted through semi-structured interviews. The procedure involved obtaining permission from the head of the study program and securing consent from the course instructor. The researcher introduced the purpose of the study to the participants and prepared the interview instruments based on the students' experiences with PBL and its perceived impact on their reading comprehension. The interview questions were pilot-tested on a small group from another class to refine clarity and structure. Following revisions, interviews were conducted face-to-face and audio-recorded with participants' permission. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. To complement the interview data, documentation such as course syllabi, lesson plans, and student assignments were also reviewed.

The main research instrument was a semi-structured interview guide designed to elicit detailed information on students' perspectives regarding the effectiveness of PBL in reading instruction. Questions included their experiences in PBL-based reading classes, the perceived impact on text comprehension, helpful aspects of PBL, encountered

challenges, and the role of group collaboration in enhancing understanding.

Data analysis followed the thematic analysis model proposed by Miles and Huberman (2018), consisting of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data reduction involved filtering and summarizing the interview content to highlight the most relevant information. The reduced data were then presented narratively to allow for coherent interpretation. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on emerging themes and were verified to ensure validity. This analytical approach was chosen to uncover patterns and meanings within students' perceptions and provide comprehensive insights into the implementation of PBL in English reading comprehension instruction.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the interview data revealed two main themes related to student perceptions: positive perceptions and challenges in the implementation of PBL.

A. Positive Perceptions of PBL The research participants consistently provided positive feedback on the use of PBL. They identified several key benefits:

1. **Increased Participation and Learning Activity:** Students felt that PBL made them more active in the learning process. Unlike conventional classes, PBL required them to discuss, debate, and proactively search for solutions, rather than just sitting and listening.
2. **Improved Reading Comprehension:** Students reported that they felt their reading comprehension improved. One participant stated, "With PBL, I have to read the text more carefully because I am looking for answers to the problem. This prevents me from just skimming." This process forced them to critically analyze the text and connect information to solve the problem.

3. **Increased Motivation:** The authentic and relevant nature of the problems was seen as a strong motivator. Students felt that the tasks they were working on had a clear purpose, not just an academic one. This made them more motivated to get involved and complete the tasks.
4. **Development of Collaboration Skills:** Group work in PBL was considered very beneficial. Students learned how to work together, express their opinions, listen to others, and reach a consensus.

B. Challenges in the Implementation of PBL

Although positive perceptions were dominant, students also identified several challenges that could hinder the effectiveness of PBL:

1. **Limited Time:** One of the biggest challenges was the limited time in class. Students felt that group discussions, information searches, and presentations were often not sufficient within the given time allocation, so they had to continue the work outside of class hours.
2. **Uneven Group Contributions:** Some participants complained about group members who participated less, leading to an unbalanced workload. This often caused frustration and could reduce the effectiveness of collaboration.
3. **Differences in Ability and Vocabulary:** Differences in reading ability among group members also became a problem. Students with lower reading skills often found it difficult to follow discussions, while others felt burdened. This challenge was exacerbated by difficulties in understanding complex academic vocabulary.

C. Discussion

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is a student-centered pedagogical approach that provides a contextual and inquiry-based framework for

learning. In the context of English reading comprehension, PBL offers opportunities for students to engage with texts actively, reflect critically, and solve problems collaboratively. This study found that the implementation of PBL in reading classes contributed significantly to students' development in understanding and analyzing English texts. Rather than approaching reading as a mechanical or passive activity, students began to view it as an active process of constructing meaning and solving contextual problems.

During the implementation, students were exposed to real-life scenarios presented through reading materials. These texts contained embedded problems that students had to investigate, discuss in groups, and respond to using evidence gathered from the readings. This problem-solving process enhanced their interpretive and inferential skills and encouraged them to use reading as a tool to address authentic challenges. Through interviews, it was evident that students felt more motivated and engaged when they were given autonomy to explore issues, connect them with their lived experiences, and propose solutions. This engagement aligns with the view of Liu and Read (2020), who emphasize reading as an interactive process between the reader, text, and context.

Moreover, the role of the teacher shifted from knowledge deliverer to facilitator. The teacher was responsible for creating challenging and relatable problems, guiding group discussions, and scaffolding learners' development throughout the reading process. Observations confirmed that students became more participatory and collaborative. They practiced not only comprehension but also communication, negotiation, and critical reflection—skills that are essential in 21st-century education. This outcome is in accordance with the view of Ryan and Deci (2020), who state that meaningful learning experiences increase students' intrinsic motivation.

One of the key strengths of PBL was its ability to foster deeper levels of understanding. Students demonstrated increased ability to analyze texts critically, identify key arguments, and relate them to larger societal or personal contexts. For example, when analyzing opinion articles about environmental issues, students did not only understand the content but also debated potential solutions using information derived from the texts. Such performance supports the assertion of Hmelo-Silver (2023), who highlights the transformative nature of PBL in helping students internalize learning.

Additionally, the PBL approach promoted collaborative learning. Students worked in groups with designated roles such as discussion leader, note-taker, or presenter. These roles created a sense of accountability and ensured that every student contributed. Peer interaction provided a safe space for sharing diverse perspectives, building consensus, and revising interpretations of the texts. Such collaborative dynamics echo the theoretical foundation of Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism, which suggests that learning is mediated through interaction.

In terms of challenges, several were observed during the study. Time constraint was a recurring issue. The PBL cycle, which involves orientation, exploration, discussion, and reflection, often exceeded the limited class period. Students and teachers alike expressed the need for extended time to fully engage in meaningful problem-solving and text analysis. This is consistent with the findings of Astuti et al. (2023), who noted that inadequate time can hinder the effectiveness of PBL.

Another challenge was the unequal participation among group members. While some students actively engaged in discussions, others remained passive. Teachers had to intervene by assigning specific roles or rotating responsibilities to ensure equal contribution. Reading difficulty was also a barrier, especially for students with lower English proficiency. These students struggled with complex vocabulary and syntax, making it hard for them

to fully participate in the problem-solving discussions. To overcome this, the teacher applied scaffolding strategies such as vocabulary pre-teaching and the use of guiding questions.

Despite these challenges, the students responded positively to the PBL method. Many reported that it made reading more meaningful and enjoyable. They appreciated the opportunity to link reading activities with real-life contexts and to work collaboratively with peers. Their feedback suggested that PBL not only improved their reading comprehension but also their critical thinking, communication, and teamwork skills. Amalia and Wulandari (2023) also noted that PBL classrooms empower students by allowing them to take ownership of their learning process.

Furthermore, PBL was found to be compatible with differentiated instruction. It allowed for task modification based on students' abilities. High-achieving students were given more complex texts and questions, while struggling students received more structured support. This flexibility supports inclusive teaching practices that accommodate diverse learner needs.

PBL also enabled interdisciplinary learning. By connecting reading with real-world problems, students engaged with topics related to science, ethics, and social studies. This integration not only enriched their reading experience but also helped them develop a holistic understanding of issues. As suggested by Andini and Yuwono (2022), interdisciplinary approaches help students see the functional value of reading beyond academic requirements.

In conclusion, PBL proved to be an effective strategy for enhancing students' reading comprehension. It encouraged active engagement, critical reflection, and collaborative learning. The method also helped students develop a deeper appreciation of texts and their relevance to real-life issues. For PBL to be successful, however, it requires thoughtful planning, adequate time, and

continuous teacher support. Professional development is essential to equip teachers with the necessary skills to facilitate PBL effectively. Once these conditions are met, PBL can significantly transform reading instruction into a dynamic and empowering learning experience.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study found that students at an Indonesian Islamic university have a very positive perception of the use of *Problem-Based Learning* (PBL) in reading class. They believe that PBL is an effective method to increase active participation, deepen reading comprehension, and foster motivation through meaningful problem-solving activities. Additionally, PBL was also considered successful in developing important collaboration and communication skills. Nevertheless, the successful implementation of PBL is not without its challenges, such as limited time, group dynamics issues, and variations in student ability. These challenges highlight the need for greater attention to planning, facilitation, and teacher support to ensure that all students gain maximum benefit from this method. This study provides empirical evidence that PBL has significant potential as an effective pedagogical approach in the context of English language education in Indonesia.

IMPLICATION

Implication The findings of this study imply that PBL can serve as an effective pedagogical approach to enhance students' reading comprehension and engagement in EFL classrooms. It not only supports academic achievement but also cultivates essential 21st-century skills such as collaboration, critical thinking, and learner autonomy. Teachers should consider integrating PBL as a regular instructional method in language learning, with proper support mechanisms in place to address students' diverse needs. This study also

underscores the importance of teacher training in designing and managing PBL environments to ensure successful implementation.

SUGGESTIONS

Based on these findings, several suggestions can be made:

1. **For Lecturers:** Lecturers using PBL are encouraged to provide more structured and clear time guidelines for each phase of PBL. It is also suggested to design specific role-sharing strategies within groups to ensure equitable participation and reduce potential conflicts.
2. **For Educational Institutions:** Institutions can provide training for lecturers to enhance their understanding of effective PBL implementation, including strategies for managing class dynamics and handling emerging challenges.
3. **For Future Researchers:** Future research can expand the scope by involving a larger student population or by quantitatively measuring the effectiveness of PBL through pre-tests and post-tests to provide stronger evidence of PBL's impact on reading comprehension.

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