# USING PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN TEACHING NARRATIVE TEXT TO ENHANCE LEARNERS' READING COMPREHENSION

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## ABSTRACT

This research investigates the effectiveness of project-based learning as an instructional strategy for teaching narrative texts to enhance reading comprehension among eighth-grade students at SMP Islamiyah Serua, Depok. Data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and assessments. By employing Kemmis and McTaggart's classroom action research model, consisting of planning, action, observation, and reflection, the implementation was conducted in two cycles, each comprising three meetings. The findings revealed that project-based learning was highly effective in improving students' reading comprehension of narrative texts, as demonstrated by positive learner responses and increased assessment scores. This instructional approach makes reading activities more dynamic, interactive, and student-centered. Moreover, it fosters broader educational objectives, including teamwork, creativity, and critical thinking skills. Following the implementation of Cycle 1, nine students (36%) achieved improved assessment outcomes, and in Cycle 2, 22 students (88%) demonstrated significant improvement with higher test scores. In conclusion, project-based learning can effectively enhance learners' reading comprehension, particularly when teaching narrative texts.

**Keywords:** narrative text; project-based learning; reading comprehension

## ABSTRAK

*Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui efektivitas project-based learning sebagai strategi pembelajaran dalam meningkatkan kemampuan membaca pemahaman teks naratif pada siswa kelas VIII SMP Islamiyah Serua, Depok. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara, observasi, dan asesmen. Penelitian menggunakan metode penelitian Tindakan kelas dengan model Kemmis & McTaggart yang terdiri dari tahap perencanaan, tindakan, observasi, dan refleksi. Implementasi dilaksanakan dalam dua siklus, masing-masing terdiri atas tiga pertemuan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pembelajaran berbasis proyek efektif meningkatkan pemahaman membaca siswa, terlihat dari peningkatan respons positif dan hasil asesmen. Pendekatan pembelajaran ini menjadikan aktivitas membaca lebih dinamis, interaktif dan berpusat pada peserta didik. Selain itu, strategi ini juga mendorong pencapaian tujuan pendidikan yang lebih luas, termasuk kerja sama, kreativitas dan keterampilan berpikir kritis. Setelah penerapan strategi pada siklus 1,, 9 siswa (36%) menunjukkan peningkatan hasil asesmen, dan pada post-assessment kedua, sebanyak 22 siswa (88%) mengalami peningkatan yang signifikan dalam nilai tes. Kesimpulan, pembelajaran berbasis proyek terbukti dapat meningkatkan kemampuan membaca pemahaman siswa, khususnya dalam pembelajaran teks naratif.*

**Kata Kunci:** *pembelajaran berbasis proyek; pemahaman membaca; teks naratif*

# INTRODUCTION

Reading is widely recognized as a fundamental component of the language learning process and plays a crucial role in developing learners' academic achievement and communicative competence (Imbaquingo & Cárdenas, 2023). In the context of junior high school education, reading comprehension is particularly essential, as learners are expected to develop the ability to understand, interpret, and evaluate written text in English. However, reading comprehension continues to be one of the most challenging skills for students learning English as an additional language (Saraswati et al., (2021). This challenge aligns with the expectations of the 2013 curriculum mandated by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture, which emphasizes mastery of core competencies and requires students to acquire extensive vocabulary to access meaning effectively (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2013; Kung, 2019).

Reading comprehension is a complex cognitive process that involves more than decoding words; it requires identifying main ideas, interpreting meaning, evaluating textual information, and responding critically (Brown, 2003; Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). The literature distinguishes between extensive and intensive reading, where extensive reading supports motivation and reading fluency, while intensive reading focuses on linguistic structure and textual detail (Etfita, 2018; Muchtar, 2019). Al-Rimawi and Al-Masri (2022), further classify reading comprehension into literal involves identifying vocabulary and idioms, recognizing details, remembering ideas, and following directions) and inferential represents concluding parallels, differences, causal linkages, and implicit meanings in the text and the researcher's intentions). and creative comprehension level (entails responding to the subject, attempting to simulate it, finding ideas and alternate solutions that may produce better results, resolving similar issues based on the read-through material, commenting, concluding a text, and developing a creative opinion), emphasizing the multifaceted nature of comprehension.

Despite its importance, preliminary observations at SMP Islamiyah Serua, Depok, revealed that many eighth-grade students experience difficulties understanding English narrative texts due to limited vocabulary, slow information processing, and challenges in deriving meaning beyond the surface level. This finding is consistent with Syahfutra and Niah (2019), who reported low levels of proficiency among students in comprehending English texts. Recent research corroborates that such difficulties are widespread among Indonesian secondary-school learners. For example, a study of junior high school students found that a majority of students struggled with essential comprehension tasks-particularly identifying main ideas, making inferences, and locating referential information largely due to limited vocabulary knowledge, poor grammatical mastery, and unfamiliarity with long sentences (Pahamzah, Syafrizal & Viona, 2021). Similarly, other investigations show that many Indonesian students lack motivation, prior background knowledge, and academic vocabulary, which collectively contribute to poor reading comprehension performance in English (Nanda & Azmy, 2020). Moreover, more recent evidence points to structural and pedagogical issues; insufficient support from textbooks, lack of engaging reading materials, and inadequate classroom reading practices have been identified as additional barriers to reading comprehension (Damayanti, 2025). These findings suggest that the reading comprehension difficulties observed at SMP Islamiyah Serua reflect a broader, systemic challenge across Indonesian EFL contexts, underscoring the urgent need for effective instructional strategies.

To address these challenges, the implementation of innovative and student-centered learning approaches is necessary. Project-based learning (PBL) has been identified as an active pedagogical strategy that engages students in authentic tasks, collaborative problem solving, decision making, and creative projects (Le, 2021; Sajad Wiratmo, 2022). Research indicates that PBL promotes learner autonomy, motivation, and critical thinking while supporting differentiated instruction and individualized learning pathways (Assyahbana, 2019). Empirical studies have demonstrated that PBL can significantly improve reading comprehension outcomes and enhance students'

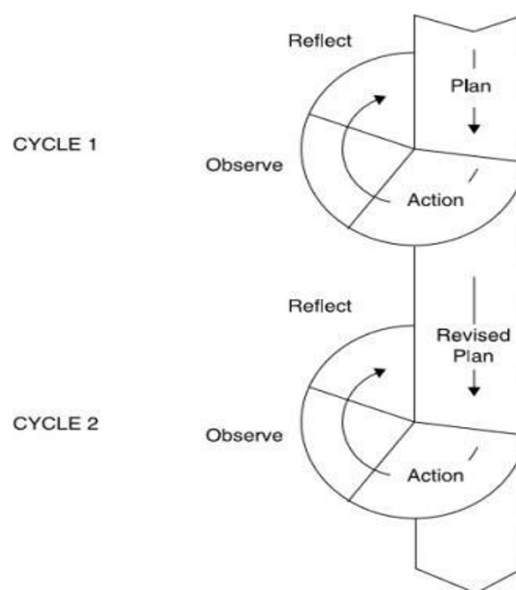engagement with texts (Imbaquingo & Cardenas, 2023; Rosyad, 2020; Rusmana, 2023; Hambali et al., 2019).

However, limited studies have explored the implementation of project-based learning specifically in teaching narrative texts at the junior high school level in Indonesia. Therefore, the present study investigates how project-based learning can enhance reading comprehension among eighth-grade learners at SMP Islamiyah Serua, Depok. The central research question guiding this study is to find out how project-based learning on narrative text can enhance the development of learners' reading comprehension in the eighth grade of SMP Islamiyah Serua, Depok.

## METHODS

### Research design

This study employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) methodology. The research design was implemented to investigate the improvement of students' reading comprehension at SMP Islamiyah Serua, Depok. Classroom action research consists of two cycles, each comprising four stages: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. According to Kemmis and McTaggart, the primary purpose of classroom action is to improve education practices, enhance participants' understanding of instructional strategies, and address problematic circumstances in a practical, systematic, and contextually appropriate way (Kemmis et al., 2014).

**Figure 1.** Classroom Action Research



### Research site and participants

The research was conducted with eighth-grade students at SMP Islamiyah Serua, Depok. In this study, the sample consisted of 25 students from the 8th grade class, who were selected to participate in the research activities.

### Data collection and analysis

The study employed both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques, including interviews, observations, and assessments. Qualitative data were gathered through interviews with students as research subjects and the English teacher. Audio recordings were utilized to obtain detailed information regarding classroom conditions, student engagement, and the overall teaching and learning process, as well as to evaluate improvements following the implementation of the

method (Creswell, 2012). Observation was also conducted using field notes and an observation sheet to document classroom activities and learner behavior (Creswell, 2012). Meanwhile, quantitative data were collected through assessments administered before and after the implementation to measure students' progress and determine the effectiveness of the intervention.

The data collected from these instruments were analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Qualitative data from interviews and observations were analyzed through thematic analysis, which involved transcribing the recorded interviews, organizing the data, identifying emerging themes, and interpreting patterns related to the teaching and learning process. Observation notes and observation sheets were examined to triangulate findings and validate the consistency between observed classroom activities and interview responses. Meanwhile, the quantitative data obtained from the pre- and post-assessments were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques to calculate mean scores, percentage increases, and overall learning gains. The comparison between the two sets of scores was used to determine the extent to which the implemented instructional method improved students' reading comprehension performance.

# FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

## Findings

### Pre-Action Interview and Pre-Assessment

Pre-action interviews were conducted on August 9th, 2023, with the English teacher at SMP Islamiyah Serua, Depok, to investigate challenges in teaching reading and perspectives on the implementation of project-based learning (PBL). The teacher reported that the primary difficulty in teaching reading is students' limited comprehension, particularly with long English texts and unfamiliar vocabulary. To address this, she frequently combines Indonesian and English to support understanding and encourages students to use dictionaries. She also stated that she typically does not apply a specific strategy in teaching reading and mainly focuses on ensuring students understand the material. Additionally, she confirmed that she had never implemented project-based learning for reading instruction. However, she believed that PBL could be successful if carefully adapted to students' proficiency levels and accompanied by clear explanations.

Interviews were also conducted with three students of varying proficiency. Their responses revealed mixed attitudes toward learning English: one student enjoyed English lessons, while the others expressed confusion and frustration due to difficulties in understanding texts. When asked to rate their proficiency, the students placed themselves at levels 5, 6, and 3 out of 10, highlighting low confidence in reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge. Students reported liking engaging learning activities and supportive explanations but struggled with constructing sentences and interpreting text meaning. None of the students had previously participated in an English project, although they understood the concept after clarification.

A pre-assessment was administered to 25 students to measure baseline reading comprehension. The results indicated an average score of 58, with only 5 students (20%) achieving a score of 70. These findings demonstrate that the majority of eighth-grade learners at SMP Islamiyah Serua exhibit low reading comprehension skills, reinforcing the need for improved instructional strategies such as project-based learning.

### The Implementation of the First Cycle

The first cycle consisted of four stages: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. In the planning stage, the researcher developed a lesson plan aligned with the syllabus and prepared instructional materials, including PowerPoint slides and project guidelines, with project-based learning (PBL) selected as the strategy to improve reading comprehension through narrative texts.

During the acting stage, three meetings were conducted on August 14th, 16th, and 20th, 2023, in which the researcher taught the lessons while the English teacher served as an observer. Students were introduced to narrative text material and then worked collaboratively in groups to develop a project based on the story "The Hare and the Tortoise," which they presented through a gallery walk. In the observing stage, the observer documented classroom interactions and noted that learners demonstrated strong engagement but experienced confusion due to their unfamiliarity with project-based learning. A post-assessment was administered at the end of the cycle, producing a mean score of 68.08, with 36% of learners meeting the Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM), reflecting a 17.3% improvement from the pre-assessment average of 58. However, the reflection stage revealed that despite increased enthusiasm and active participation during the project, students still struggled with reading comprehension, particularly in answering assessment questions and managing time during the test. These results indicated that further adjustments and reinforcement were necessary in the next cycle.

*The Implementation of the Second Cycle*

In the planning stage of Cycle 2, the researcher and the English teacher collaboratively revised the lesson plan based on the reflections from Cycle 1. Key adjustments included requiring students to bring dictionaries to support vocabulary acquisition and reinforce prior knowledge of narrative text to address comprehension difficulties identified in the first cycle. The project materials remained the same, but additional scaffolding was introduced, particularly vocabulary support. An observation sheet was also prepared for the teacher to systematically document classroom activities and learner participation. This cycle consisted of three meetings.

In the acting phase, instruction was carried out on August 23, August 26, and September 6, 2023. Students worked on a new narrative project, "The Ant and the Dove." Unlike Cycle 1, where learners struggled with vocabulary and comprehension, the researcher provided direct vocabulary stimulation and encouraged students to record unfamiliar words to facilitate understanding. Group work continued as in the previous cycle, but this time learners demonstrated improved readiness during project development and presentation. The third meeting concluded with group presentations in front of the class, followed by peer responses and feedback from the researchers.

During the observation phase, the researcher recorded that learner enthusiasm and engagement were noticeably higher compared to Cycle 1. Although some students required additional monitoring in the second meeting, overall classroom dynamics improved, with learners showing greater confidence in project activities and comprehension of narrative text.

Post-assessment 2 was administered on September 6, 2023, to evaluate learning outcomes. The results showed a mean score of 81.24 (2031/25), with 22 out of 25 students (88%) meeting the Minimum Mastery Criterion (Score 70). This demonstrates substantial improvement compared to the pre-assessment average of 58 and the Cycle 1 average of 68.08. The improvement from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2 was calculated at 19.33%, indicating a significant increase in reading comprehension performance.

In the reflection phase, the findings confirmed that project-based learning effectively enhanced students' reading comprehension abilities in narrative text. Students became more attentive, enthusiastic, and confident, particularly in vocabulary development and sentence construction. Although most students responded positively to the strategy, a small number continued to experience difficulties, as evidenced by the remaining 12% who did not pass the assessment.

Overall, Cycle 2 demonstrated clear progress from Cycle 1, primarily due to improved instructional scaffolding, vocabulary support, and learner engagement strategies, showing that project-based learning is a suitable and effective approach for strengthening reading comprehension in eighth-grade students at SMP Islamiyah, Serua.
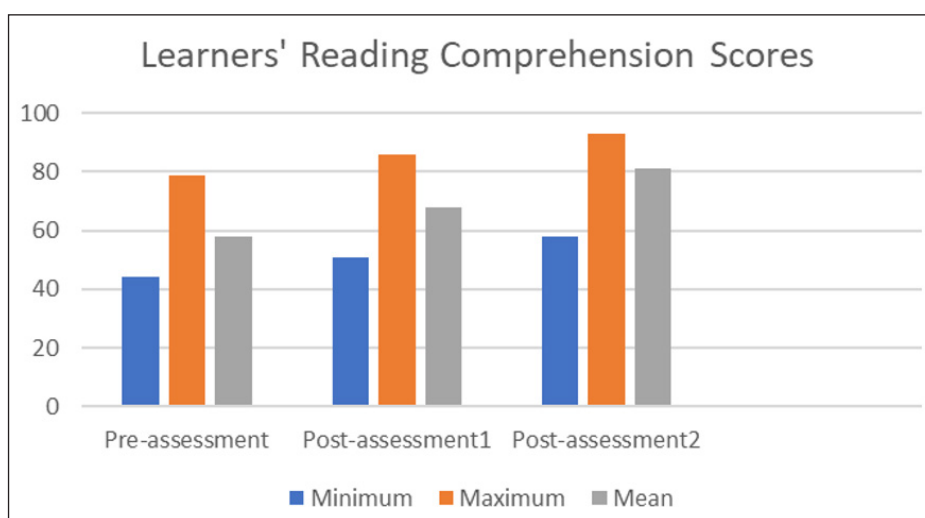
*Post-Action Findings*

Following the completion of the second cycle, post-interviews were conducted with both the English teacher and selected students to evaluate the implementation of project-based learning and its impact on reading comprehension. The English teacher reported that students demonstrated strong enthusiasm and engagement throughout the project activities. She observed that learners followed project guidelines effectively and were able to understand narrative stories through discussion and observation prior to reading. She further noted that project-based learning significantly increased students' willingness to read, changing initial reluctance into motivation, mainly because the strategy presented reading tasks in an enjoyable and meaningful format. However, she also highlighted a need for sufficient time allocation and emphasized the importance of providing keyword vocabulary to support comprehension. Overall, she confirmed that project-based learning operated effectively in improving students' reading comprehension.

Interviews with three learners revealed consistent positive responses. The students described the project as enjoyable and motivating, stating that it encouraged creativity and enabled deeper analysis of the stories. They agreed that project activities improved their reading comprehension because the narrative tasks required them to read, interpret, and discuss the text collaboratively. The students expressed appreciation for group work, noting that collaboration helped them understand difficult content. Their primary concern involved group members who occasionally did not contribute equally. All three learners indicated that their comprehension had improved, as they found it easier to interpret English texts and enjoyed reading more than before. They suggested selecting stories that interested them to maintain engagement.

Post-assessment results provided quantitative evidence of progress. As shown in Figure 2, the graphs clearly illustrate a consistent upward trend in learners' reading comprehension performance from the pre-assessment through post-assessment 1 and post-assessment 2. The mean score increased from 58 in the pre-assessment to 68.08 after cycle 1 and further improved to 81.24 after cycle 2. The percentage of students achieving the minimum mastery criterion (score 70) increased from 20% before the intervention to 36% after cycle 1 and then to 88% after cycle 2. Additionally, the maximum score increased from 79 to 93, and the minimum score improved from 44 to 58. These statistical results confirm that project-based learning had a substantial impact on improving reading comprehension.

**Figure 2.** The Finding of Learners' Reading Improvement



Several improvements were made in Cycle 2 based on reflections from Cycle 1. Unlike cycle 1, where students faced difficulties due to limited vocabulary support and confusion about project

expectations, cycle 2 included explicit vocabulary instruction and the requirement for students to bring dictionaries to assist comprehension. Cycle 2 also offered clearer project guidelines and more structured monitoring, resulting in stronger student preparedness and increased participation during group project development and presentations. Engagement levels were significantly higher in Cycle 2, and classroom management improved, as learners were more confident and collaborative. The adjustments contributed to the greater increase in assessment scores observed in Cycle 2.

## *Discussion*

This action-research study examined the effect of project-based learning (PBL) on eighth-grade students' reading comprehension of narrative text at SMP Islamiyah Serua. Quantitative results indicate that the PBL intervention, particularly when augmented with explicit vocabulary scaffolding and clearer procedural guidance, was associated with substantial improvement in reading comprehension.

## *PBL and Learner Engagement, Motivation and Authentic use of Language*

The study's qualitative and quantitative outcomes align with the established findings that PBL promotes students' engagement, motivation, and authentic language use. Participants in this study reported increased enthusiasm and willingness to read when tasks were framed as meaningful projects; classroom observation also recorded greater attentiveness and collaboration across cycles. These effective and behavioral outcomes mirror prior syntheses of PBL research that link project work to heightened student motivation and the development of 21st-century skills such as collaboration and sustained inquiry (Bell, 2010).

Stoller's (2006) theoretical work on PBL approaches in second/foreign language education argues that PBL fosters authentic, integrated use of language (reading, speaking, writing) through sustained tasks and purposeful communication, conditions that support deeper processing and incidental vocabulary learning. The observed classroom processes pre-task activation, collaborative story analysis, project construction, and public presentation (gallery walk), exemplify the kind of sustained, authentic engagement Stoller advocates and help explain the performance gains recorded post-assessments.

## *Scaffolding and vocabulary instructions as mediators of PBL effectiveness*

A key contribution of this study is the contrast between Cycle 1 and Cycle 2, which classifies instructional elements necessary for PBL to yield measurable comprehension gains in EFL contexts. In Cycle 1, students showed enthusiasm and collaboration but struggled with comprehension and test performance, especially when facing unfamiliar vocabulary and timed assessment conditions. These findings are consonant with vocabulary-learning research emphasizing the centrality of explicit and incidental vocabulary support within communicative or task-based instruction (Nation, 2001). Nation argues that both deliberate vocabulary instruction and opportunities for repeated, meaningful encounters with target words are necessary for robust receptive and productive learning, precisely the types of support the researcher added in Cycle 2. The effectiveness of such scaffolding in the current study supports the claim that PBL alone is not a panacea, which means that it must be coupled with structured language support to address learners' lexical needs.

## *Iterative refinement and PBL research evidence base*

The action-research cycle used here (plan-act-observe-reflect) and the incremental improvement from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2 reflect the broader PBL literature's emphasis on design, teacher mediation, and iterative refinement. Thomas's (2000) review summarized that PBL studies commonly report gains when projects are well-designed, aligned to assessment, and supported by teacher scaffolding;

conversely, poorly scaffolded projects often yield limited academic gains despite strong engagement. The pattern in this study, initial engagement with modest score gains followed by clearer scaffolding and larger gains, parallels Thomas's synthesis and reinforces the practical importance of careful project design and teacher facilitation in EFL settings.

*Challenges: time allocation, group dynamics and assessment alignment*

The interview results identified persistent challenges that mirror concerns raised in empirical PBL literature, especially in EFL classrooms. First, several participants and the teacher emphasized the need for more time for project work and assessment, a common constraint noted by PBL researchers who caution that authentic projects require sufficient time for both task completion and language consolidation. Second, unequal group participation (social loafing) was reported by students as a downside of group projects; the literature recommends structured roles and accountability mechanisms to mitigate this issue. Third, assessment design and test conditions (especially limited time during post-tests) affected performance. Although students understood and could retell narratives, they sometimes failed to perform under test constraints. Earlier studies in EFL contexts have similarly reported that without alignment between formative project tasks and summative assessments, improvements in classroom performance do not always translate to higher test scores, unless assessment tasks mirror project tasks closely. These operational challenges have been documented in PBL case studies and reviews (Fragoulis, 2009; Guo et al., 2020).

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTION

To sum up, the present action research provides convergent qualitative and quantitative evidence that PBL, when carefully designed and scaffolded, can substantially improve reading comprehension among Indonesian EFL learners. The marked improvement from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2 illustrates that teacher mediation (especially vocabulary support and clearer procedural guidance) is crucial to transform PBL enthusiasm into measurable learning gains. These findings corroborate broader reviews of PBL in education and language teaching and underscore the value of combining authentic, project-based tasks with explicit language pedagogy.

Practically, this study suggests several recommendations for teachers implementing PBL in EFL reading instruction. First, the project should be designed with explicit language goals and aligned assessments. Make sure that summative tests assess similar skills practiced during projects (text analysis, summarizing, and vocabulary use). Second, provide systematic vocabulary scaffolding. Pre-teach key lexis, require students to record and revisit unfamiliar words, and embed opportunities for repeated, meaningful use. Third, structure group roles and accountability. Assign clear responsibilities and use peer and teacher evaluation to reduce unequal participation. Fourth, allow sufficient time for project phases and reflection. Time allocation should include rehearsal, revision and consolidation phrases so that project gains generalize to timed assessments.

While findings are promising, several limitations temper generalization. The study was conducted in a single classroom with 25 students and two cycles; larger-scale or longitudinal studies would strengthen claims about PBL's sustained effect on reading comprehension. In addition, although the intervention combined affective, social, and cognitive strategies, disentangling which components (vocabulary, pre-teaching, group work, presentation, or the authentic task itself) contributed most to gains would be valuable. Future research could use experimental or mixed-methods design to isolate mechanisms of change and compare variants of PBL (PBL with versus without explicit vocabulary instruction) in EFL contexts.

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