

Application of Project-Based Learning in Higher Vocational Business English Writing Courses

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Keywords: Constructivism; Project-Based Learning; Business English Writing; Instructional Design

Abstract: Project-based learning (PBL), grounded in constructivist learning theory, is a teaching model well-suited to the characteristics of higher vocational students and embodies the essence of vocational education. Implementing PBL in vocational business English writing courses can engage students' interest in writing and enhance their writing proficiency. However, applying this approach requires a shift in teaching philosophy and faces certain constraints, posing new challenges for both teachers and students.

1. Introduction

Business English writing is a specialized course designed to train students to use English for written business communication. It integrates business knowledge, communication skills, and English writing practice. Because business English writing involves unique genres, formats, and linguistic features, its instruction is neither simply about teaching English nor merely about conveying business knowledge, but must focus on practical training centered on project tasks. This approach enables students to learn to conduct meaningful written communication in the business context. In this way, students become familiar with various business writing genres and learn to organize business information coherently in English, so as to use different genres appropriately to establish effective business communication and achieve commercial objectives.

In the context of teaching business English writing in vocational colleges, implementing PBL can transform the instructional approach. It is significant for reforming the business English writing curriculum, improving students' writing abilities, and comprehensively enhancing their English application skills. Rosli, Abdul and Goh (2023) [1] describes project learning as a set of curricular activities that allow teachers to guide students in in-depth investigation of real-world topics. These features of PBL are highly compatible with the practical nature of business English writing instruction, suggesting its potential to reform and enrich the learning process.

2. Characteristics of Business English Writing

Business English writing differs from other types of English writing in its genres, formats, and language usage. Therefore, teaching this course must go beyond pure language instruction or

business knowledge transmission. Instead, it should emphasize practical, hands-on training centered around project tasks. Instructors should design activities that enable students to use English for meaningful written communication in authentic business scenarios.

Because business activities span many fields, the business English writing curriculum should cultivate students' writing abilities that are closely related to real business practices. This means making students familiar with various business writing genres and training them to organize business information in English in a logical and orderly manner. The goal is for students to use these genres appropriately to establish effective business communication and accomplish business objectives. These requirements highlight the need for teaching methods that integrate language skills with practical business contexts.

3. Project-Based Learning

Project-based learning (PBL) is an instructional model grounded in constructivist learning theory. In constructivism, learning is viewed as an active process of constructing knowledge rather than the passive reception of information. Learners build new understanding based on their existing knowledge and experiences. This learner-centered principle has become a guiding theory in educational practice worldwide. According to Cahyono et al. (2024) [2], the goal of project teaching is to engage students in autonomous project activities guided by the teacher, thereby developing students' comprehensive aspirations and enhancing their overall competencies.

The most distinctive characteristic of PBL is that it is *project-centered, teacher-guided, and student-centered*, which changes the traditional passive “teacher lectures, students listen” mode. PBL emphasizes students' active exploration, discovery, and construction of knowledge. In practice, a project task is assigned to students to complete independently; from information gathering and plan design to implementation and evaluation, students are responsible for the work while the teacher acts as a consultant and guide. This active learning environment stimulates students' curiosity and creativity, cultivates their ability to analyze and solve practical problems, and aligns with the vocational education value of focusing on applied competence.

4. Implementation of Project-Based Learning in Business English Writing Courses

Project-based learning emphasizes a “learning-by-doing” approach that immerses learners in practical experience. Since the higher vocational business English writing course itself is highly practice-oriented, using PBL in instruction can not only improve students' writing skills and interest in learning English, but also help them apply what they learn to real-world situations, thereby enhancing their practical English proficiency. The design of the project and the teaching process are crucial to successful implementation and instructional effectiveness. Below is an example from the “Business Report” unit to illustrate the key design elements and instructional steps of PBL in a business English writing course.

4.1. Identifying the Project and Planning

At this stage, the teacher should guide students to understand the features of the project and help them formulate a clear and feasible plan. For instance, when teaching the business report unit, the instructor might first set up a simulated business environment, then provide each student with a worksheet containing questions related to the project (Table 1).

Situation: The company where you are working plans to launch a new project in 2026. The Board of Directors asks you to investigate staff members' opinions on this plan and write a report analyzing the plan's feasibility. The report is needed before June 5, 2025, to be discussed at the next

board meeting.

Table 1: Preparation for Writing

Questions	Answers
What is(are) the request(s) of the report?	
Who will read the report?	
When is the report needed?	
How will you gather the information?	
What else should you consider?	

After reflecting on the questions above, students gain a realistic sense of the business communication context and understand that they are undertaking an important business communication activity. This motivates them to actively work on the project. Next, the teacher can lead students to learn common vocabulary, sentence structures, and formats for writing a business report, and can provide authentic model reports as references. This preparation helps students use standard and idiomatic business English in their subsequent writing.

4.2. Group Discussion

The teacher first divides students into several small groups (around five per group). Each group is treated as a department within the company, with the teacher acting as the company's "boss." Group members are assigned roles such as manager and leader, and these roles rotate through different learning activities (Table 2). The manager organizes the group to discuss the structure of the model report. Group members brainstorm and share all relevant ideas on the business topic, which gives them a basic understanding of the language and organization of the report. After this discussion, the "boss" assigns the writing task (i.e. writing a report). The group then discusses how to allocate work: the group leader coordinates, and all members (including the manager and leader) supervise one another and solve problems together.

Table 2: Group Task Assignment Plan

Team Manager: Eva

Team Leader: Susan

Group Members: Jack, Alice, Andrew

Group Task: Writing a report

Division of Tasks

Group Member	Personal Task	Completion Date
Jack	Understanding and conceptualizing the task (facts, forms and formats of a report)	2025.5.19
Eva	Collecting information (purposes and opinions of the report)	2025.5.19–20
Susan	Organizing information and coordinating communication	2025.5.21
Andrew	Writing the first draft	2025.5.22–31
Alice	Revising and finalizing	2025.6.1–5

Collaborative group work is not only a cognitive process but also an interpersonal communication process. The teacher should assign tasks based on each student's ability and strengths so that every student has the opportunity to showcase their talents and explore their potential in areas like leadership, technology use, communication, and creativity. This arrangement

also ensures that students of different levels all make progress on their own knowledge base. Because the writing task is completed collectively, and the group's performance affects individual grades, group members naturally supervise each other, thereby achieving self-regulated learning and cultivating a sense of teamwork.

4.3. Data Collection and Organization

Once the group division and roles are decided, each student must plan and monitor their own progress according to the project theme, task division, and personal work habits. The teacher should encourage students to gather relevant writing information through multiple channels, such as library and periodical research, field surveys, and online searches. In the case of the business report unit, the writing task is to survey company employees' opinions for the report. Students might choose their classmates as survey subjects to collect information and then summarize and organize the data. This process fully simulates a real business environment, which can strongly motivate students. To complete the project, students will use various learning resources and read a large volume of relevant business English materials. This extensive language input, combined with the task-driven context, cultivates students' abilities to collect, analyze, and utilize information.

4.4. Draft Writing

Students can use background materials provided by the teacher and imitate the previous business model to collaboratively complete the first draft. In doing so, one group member may take the lead in writing while others review and supplement the draft. This collaborative approach means that group members communicate and cooperate to complete the writing task together, with each student shouldering some responsibility. It helps cultivate their spirit of cooperation and sense of responsibility, laying a solid foundation for smoothly integrating into a work team in the future. Yi (2024) [3] suggests that tasks force students to use language; thus, to enable students to truly master writing patterns in different business contexts and to develop flexible, varied writing skills. Teachers then can engage with students during the writing process, encouraging them to repeatedly polish their language so that the business English in the report is as precise, clear, and organized as possible.

4.5. Presentation of Results and Evaluation

After finishing the writing task, each group presents its business report to the class. The teacher first discusses with the students to establish evaluation criteria for the report's structure, language, content, etc. Table 3 is the peer-assessment form collaboratively developed by the teacher and students for this unit. Then, the teacher can appoint members from other groups to act as the Board of Directors, allowing students to critique and suggest revisions for their peers' work. Afterwards, the teacher analyzes the students' reports, focusing on aspects such as format, word choice, syntax, and tone, to help students recognize their improvements and remaining issues in these areas. Finally, combining the evaluations of both students and the teacher, the teacher can select several representative reports at varying quality levels and evaluate each one, using these examples as models for students of different proficiency levels. With feedback, students can promptly revise their own work to produce a more polished final report.

This stage of the project keeps students continuously immersed in a business communication process. Role-playing and switching roles allow students to immediately identify their own problems and deficiencies. It promotes the development of their comprehensive qualities—such as business English skills and creativity—and its successful completion signals their mastery of the

business English writing content and the objectives of the writing task.

Table 3: Peer Assessment Form (Report)

Items	Excellent	Good	Need Improving
Using the right format (formal/informal)			
Introducing the purpose of the report appropriately			
Selecting the facts sensibly			
Distinguishing facts and opinions clearly			
Separating the parts of the report logically			
Checking everything, e.g. grammatical errors, spelling errors and punctuations, etc			

5. Reflections and Implications

5.1. Project-Based Learning as a Beneficial Teaching Approach

Project-based learning emphasizes the central role of students by involving them in the completion of meaningful tasks. It encourages them to engage in self-directed learning more actively and purposefully. PBL provides students with the opportunity to apply textbook knowledge to complete an authentic task; by finishing a real-world task and connecting it proactively with their learning context, students' motivation for autonomous learning is strengthened. Moreover, as students participate deeply in project activities, they construct knowledge and train skills throughout the process. These features are in line with the principles of practicality and learner autonomy in business English writing instruction. Implementing PBL in business English writing courses is conducive to stimulating students' enthusiasm for learning and improving their ability to apply English in practical contexts. It gives students the chance to demonstrate multiple intelligences and to fully utilize information to construct new knowledge, thereby developing them into well-rounded professionals in business English.

5.2. Challenges in Applying Project-Based Learning

Applying PBL in business English writing teaching presents new challenges for teachers. The first challenge is the shift in teaching philosophy. PBL changes traditional classroom instruction and assessment methods: teachers must design project content in a scientifically sound way, understand students' cognitive processes during project completion, and effectively manage the class while guiding students toward efficient autonomous learning. In assessment, teachers should increase the emphasis on formative evaluation and employ diversified evaluation methods. Second, because business English writing projects require rich language resources and support from modern educational technology, teachers also need to improve their ability to use multimedia and Internet resources. This enables them to integrate the latest information resources into their teaching in a timely manner and to provide students with effective guidance for information learning and application. Finally, PBL requires teachers to invest more time and effort, as they must provide guidance throughout the project process. Additionally, diversified assessment methods increase the teacher's workload in evaluating student performance.

6. Conclusion

The business English writing course is highly specialized, and its somewhat dry and obscure content can affect students' engagement and concentration. All these factors necessitate that teachers pay more attention to instructional design. Reforming business English writing instruction

through project-based learning has been shown, after a period of trial, to be feasible, effective, and practical. Teachers engaged in vocational business English writing instruction should flexibly apply this teaching method according to different learners and content. By guiding students to learn through practice, they can help students truly master language use and become versatile business English professionals.

Acknowledgements

(6024310007S) Morphological Awareness and L2 Vocabulary Acquisition: An Empirical Study Based on Eye-Tracking Technology (2024 University-Level Key Research Project)

(2024WTSCX025) An Empirical Study on the Effectiveness of Eye-Tracking-Based Morphological Awareness Teaching Strategies in English Vocabulary Learning (2024 Characteristic Innovation Project of Guangdong Provincial Department of Education)

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