NAVIGATING THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM: ENGLISH TRANSFORMATIONAL TEACHERS' CHALLENGES WITH PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

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Abstract

Implementing project-based learning in the classroom remains a significant challenge for educators. In response, numerous studies have been conducted on the challenges of implementing this method. This study focuses on English transformational teachers' challenges in implementing project-based learning within the Merdeka Curriculum. This study aims to identify the challenges English transformational teachers face in implementing project-based learning at the middle and upper education levels in Garut, West Java, Indonesia. A descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design was used in this research. Data collection was conducted through interviews. The data were analysed using Marx et al.'s theory and the Miles formula, which included data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The results showed that of the six challenges proposed by Marx et al., three significant challenges faced by English transformational teachers in implementing project-based learning were time management, controlling and supporting student learning, and school facilitation. Despite being English transformational teachers, the findings indicate that integrating project-based learning into the Merdeka Curriculum remains challenging.

Keywords: Project-based learning, Merdeka Curriculum, Transformational Teacher

INTRODUCTION

Project-based learning is an approach that needs and requires a natural learning environment based on the actual context in the field. It is a classroom learning process that focuses on core subjects and allows teachers to implement customized learning, particularly in the Merdeka Curriculum. The PJBL model is one of the relevant learning methods for implementing this Merdeka Curriculum (Baharullah et al., 2022). The success of PJBL learning models implemented in the Merdeka curriculum increases students' motivation, active collaboration with their classmates, and independent learning, improves students' creativity, high academic performance, and ability in problem-solving, and creates authentic learning circumstances

(Amalina et al., 2023). In addition, PJBL is a teaching technique based on learning activities and real-world assignments that challenge students to tackle in groups. The PJBL method focuses on promoting effective learning by allowing collaborative group work to answer questions, solve problems, and tackle challenges while also giving students more freedom in choosing topics, resources, and responsibilities among group members, the way to design and display the final product (Shaban Aldabbus, 2018). Furthermore, PJBL improves learners' metacognitive skills, allowing them to formulate helpful strategies and evaluate their solutions to challenges (Hafeez, 2022). As a result, in language learning and teaching, PJBL in the Merdeka Curriculum has been more effective than the traditional model.

However, the implementation of the project-based learning method has some challenges. Sartika et al. (2022) Discovered that most teachers, even experienced ones, would find challenges and obstacles when integrating PJBL. PJBL requires much time to solve complex problems. Most teachers reported that facilitating PJBL was difficult (Aksela & Haatainen, 2018). To support the statement, Safitri and Kusumaningtyas (2023) Argued that the PJBL approach takes a long time to complete the project. Furthermore, students who lack group work abilities may have difficulties working collaboratively. During project activities, students face challenges and problems such as uneven participation of group members, dominance from some members, and an information-searching technique that must be directed and results in the growth of knowledge (Sagita et al., 2023). Furthermore, teachers need more readily access modules or information to learn about PJBL. Also, implementing PJBL has challenges and potential approaches to establishing a project-based curriculum, managing classroom interactions, fostering student inquiry, and assessing student learning (Condliffe et al., 2017).

Several studies have examined the implementation of project-based learning (PJBL) models, highlighting various challenges across educational levels and online classrooms. Teachers encounter difficulties with PJBL in primary schools (Cintang et al., 2018; Fitriyani et al., 2023; Shaban Aldabbus, 2018), and English teachers face barriers in senior high schools (Habók & Nagy, 2016; Marx et al., 1997; Sartika et al., 2022; Tiwow et al., 2023; Winarno, 2023). Higher education institutions also identify new challenges with PJBL (Farikah et al., 2022; Nurkhamidah, 2023; Spalek, 2014), and online classes present additional problems (Ching & Hsu, 2013; Kim, 2021; Koh et al., 2010). Despite the Challenges, Research emphasizes the positive impacts of project-based learning (PJBL), particularly in education, by promoting essential 21st-century skills such as cognitive development, academic achievement, collaboration, technological proficiency, problem-solving, and scientific processes like research, presentation, and reflection (Mihić & Završki, 2017; Markula & Aksela, 2022; Pasi et al., 2019).

This study focuses on English transformational teachers' challenges in implementing project-based learning (PJBL) within the Merdeka Curriculum framework. The previous studies discuss project-based learning at the educational level and online learning challenges; this research explicitly targets transformational teachers within an innovative curriculum. These teachers are expected to be independent, proficient, collaborative, and capable across disciplines. The study is limited to middle and upper levels of education where PJBL is implemented under the Merdeka Curriculum, recognizing that not all teachers are transformational or use PJBL, and not all schools adopt this curriculum. The researcher aims to investigate the challenges encountered by English transformational teachers in the merdeka curriculum.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Project Based Learning

Project-based learning is a learning approach that evolved from pre-existing educational concepts. Project-based learning (PJBL) has roots in early educational concepts, notably encouraged by John Dewey in the early 20th century. Dewey's "Learning by Doing" philosophy emphasized hands-on experiences with real-world problems, integrating constructivist learning theory by placing students' real-life experiences at the core of learning activities (Winarno, 2023; Habók & Nagy, 2016). PJBL is an innovative, student-centered learning paradigm that positions teachers as motivators and facilitators. It encourages autonomous student learning, fostering investigation into real-world issues and challenges, thereby enhancing understanding and knowledge retention compared to traditional textbook-based learning (Shofiyuddin et al., 2023; Yuliansyah & Ayu, 2021). Students engage in scenario-based problem-solving, culminating their learning with project presentations (Baysura et al., 2016). In essence, PJBL is a student-centred educational strategy that enables students to explore, evaluate, and create knowledge through project-based activities supported by teachers (Tesalonika et al., 2022).

Merdeka Curriculum

One learning model that can be applied in the independent curriculum (Merdeka Curriculum) is Project Based Learning. The Minister of Education and Culture launched a new curriculum concept, the Merdeka curriculum, with the idea of independence for education in Indonesia to determine the best way or method to use during the learning process (Afida et al., 2021). The Merdeka curriculum is implemented autonomously with three options: 1) Independent Learning, 2) Independent Change, and 3) Independent Share (Andari, 2022). Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum is tailored to the readiness of teachers and education professionals (Arifa, 2022). The curriculum serves as a tool for achieving educational goals and a guide for teachers in teaching (Febrina & Syafril, 2022). It strives to give a more holistic and inclusive approach to education that emphasizes character, creativity, critical thinking abilities, and academic knowledge. The Merdeka Curriculum is intended to be more adaptive and flexible to the requirements of individual students, with a stronger emphasis on student-centered learning and the use of technology (Muhammad et al., 2023).

Transformational Teacher

The Merdeka curriculum focuses not only on how students learn but also on teachers. Teachers are those in charge of teaching in an educational unit; hence, they must hold formal qualifications. The official qualification is intended since the instructor is responsible for his students' attitudes and morals and for transferring knowledge. As a result, it is critical to improve educators' quality continually. One of these is the existence of a mover-teacher program. The Transformational Teacher program continuously develops teacher professionalism through training and collective activities. The Transformational Teacher program focuses on creating learning leadership and teacher independence in developing their professional careers (Kemendikbud, 2022). Thus, through the Transformational Teacher program, teachers must be equipped with various training and workshops to improve the quality of Indonesian teachers (Madhakomala et al., 2022).

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology used in this research was descriptive qualitative research. This descriptive qualitative research was described and undertaken with an assumed background to clarify the happenings. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is a process of knowing that draws on various methodological traditions of inquiry to investigate a social or human problem. This study employed a case study approach, focusing on two English Transformational Teachers at Garut School who implemented PJBL following the Merdeka Curriculum rules. The participants represented middle and upper-level classes.

The instrument was conducted through semi-structured interviews, following Creswell's (2009) guidelines, which involved open-ended questions to elicit participants' ideas and opinions. The interview consisted of 23 questions covering ten aspects related to the challenges of implementing PJBL. Unplanned questions could also arise during the interviews, providing in-depth data. The interview data were analysed using Marx et al.'s (1997) theory of PJBL challenges, which includes time management, classroom management, control and supporting student learning, facilitating learning, technology utilization, and student evaluation. The data analysis process involved data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification, as described by Miles et al. (2014).

FINDINGS

The finding shows the challenges two English Transformational teachers encountered in implementing project-based learning in the Merdeka curriculum. T1 indicated Teacher 1, and T2 indicated Teacher 2.

Challenges in Time Management

Based on the findings, Teacher T2 acknowledged challenges in managing and optimizing time during project-based learning (PJBL) implementation. The teacher frequently encountered situations that disrupted the planned schedule in the module, necessitating constant time re-management. This difficulty synchronizing and reorganizing time led to PJBL taking longer than anticipated. Additionally, time constraints posed challenges in monitoring the development of each student's competence.

> "[Yes, in its implementation in fact, in the field sometimes there is something that happens and we are constrained, meaning that what we plan may not happen or be carried out as planned because of the situation and condition factors, meaning that the obstacles faced in terms of optimising time are sometimes not achieved due to different situations in the field]" (T2.2)

> "[Yes, it is difficult to see the development of each student's competence because we have limited time]" (T2.10)

In contrast to Teacher 2 (T2), Teacher 1 (T1) does not experience challenges in managing time for implementing Project-based Learning (PJBL). T1 offers solutions by adjusting modules based on the theme's difficulty. The planning time is shorter for easy themes, while complex themes require longer planning. If PJBL cannot be completed in class due to other constraints, T1 allows students to work on projects at home, documenting their work through video. The key to minimizing difficulties lies in the teacher's preparation and readiness to provide solutions, ensuring the continuity of PJBL implementation. The English Transformational Teacher conveyed this during interviews.

"[yes does like something like that, but I don't have difficulties in time because I like to make it first, when we make a teaching module we make a plan for this activity for how many hours of this lesson, depending also, for example, if the theme is difficult or easy, if it is easy, 2 hours of lesson is enough if it is difficult like a procedure, procedure, students make a project, maybe it can be 2 meetings depending on what the teacher describes the child as, preparing when making the lesson plan.]" (T1.4)

The findings indicate that English Transformational teachers face challenges controlling, supporting, recognizing, monitoring, and scaffolding students' activities during Project-based Learning (PJBL). Teacher 1 (T1) specifically struggles with monitoring and supporting less active children within diverse groups, where each child has varying abilities and characteristics. Despite initial project explanations and role assignments, some children still encounter difficulties, requiring additional teacher and peer support. This diversity complicates the teacher's ability to effectively monitor and control group activities, hindering the assessment of individual child development.

"[The difficulty is like this, a difficulty like this is that children who are less active still have to be monitored or there is special monitoring sometimes even though each child has his role, his friend still has to be helped by his friend, his friend helps and his teacher controls and sees his development]" (T1.12)

T1 encountered challenges when assisting students with group work outside of class hours, needing to align her schedule with the student's availability. This coordination posed difficulties in effectively supporting the students' group work process.

"[Providing assistance with the group work process outside of class hours may be difficult because the children return home in the afternoon so the children are most continued in the next meeting, because it has been arranged, for example oh this will not be done in one meeting, it will be continued in the next meeting so it is still done at school]" (T1.19)

Both T1 and T2 faced challenges supervising and assisting student group work due to the diverse characteristics and abilities of students. The limitations of having only one teacher to oversee a large number of students exacerbated these difficulties, making it challenging to provide personalized supervision, understand individual student traits, and facilitate an effective feedback process.

"[Well in essence teachers are required to know the character of students but it also depends on if in a public school the obstacle is that because there are too many students it may be difficult to recognise and supervise each student individually but if at the elementary level it might be possible because there are few students if in junior high school maybe the homeroom teacher can but if the static teacher sure will have difficulty in understanding the character of each student]" (T2.7)

In line with T1, T2 faces challenges when assisting students outside of lesson hours, requiring synchronization of their schedule with students' activities. This adds complexity to the teacher's role in supporting student learning effectively.

"[Yes, if we assist in group work outside of class hours, there must be obstacles because we have to synchronize our time with theirs, seeing that there are a lot of our agendas or their agendas, such as extracurricular activities and other organizational activities, tutoring, and the like so that it will be difficult in terms of time conditioning]" (T2.16).

Challenges in Facilitating Learning from School

The findings from interviews with English transformational teachers indicate that they face challenges due to inadequate learning facilities in schools. Teacher T1 reported difficulties when necessary project-based learning facilities were unavailable, forcing students to complete work at home. As a result, the optimal implementation of project-based learning (PJBL) was hindered.

"[Maybe the difficulty is when using equipment that is not available at school, for example when making something and the facilities are not available at school, so it requires work at home which makes it difficult like that but now it is anticipated with videos, so children must video the work so that they can control and supervise their performance when working at home]" (T1. 30).

Teacher T2, similar to T1, faced challenges due to inadequate facilities essential for implementing project-based learning (PJBL). This included a lack of basic amenities like electricity, internet access, and multimedia resources in classrooms. These deficiencies hindered the effective execution of PJBL, impacting the learning environment and student outcomes.

"[Yes, of course, there are many problems regarding facility support. Firstly, the completeness of the facilities in the class needs to be improved in terms of network electricity, and multimedia; these are still limited in each class]" (T2.13)

DISCUSSION

Challenges in managing time

The study identified time management as a significant challenge for English Transformational Teachers when implementing Project-based Learning (PJBL). PJBL often took longer than planned, making it difficult for teachers to monitor students' competency development. This aligns with Habók & Nagy (2016), who noted that PJBL is time-consuming and requires detailed planning. Similarly, Marx et al. (1997) and Winarno (2023) highlighted that projects usually exceed the expected timeframe, limiting the opportunity for groups to share their work with the class. Sagita, Rahmat, Priyandoko, and Sriyati (2023) found that extended project management time without a defined plan led to delays. However, the Merdeka Curriculum allocates particular time for flexible project activities, which can be adjusted based on conditions and teacher availability. Project learning activities were planned from the beginning of the school year, resulting in a more structured and organized implementation.

Challenges in supporting and controlling student learning

The study found that English Transformational Teachers struggled to support, control, recognise, and monitor project progress due to being the sole monitor in the class. This aligns

with Shaban Aldabbus (2018), who noted teachers' difficulties in monitoring and scaffolding students' activities, often giving too much freedom or insufficient modeling. Marx et al. (1997) also highlighted teachers' need to control information flow while fostering student knowledge construction. Winarmo (2023) reported similar obstacles in applying PJBL, including classroom control and student monitoring challenges. Despite these challenges, teachers were pleased with the outcomes, observing that PJBL prepared students to be more self-sufficient, responsible, creative, and collaborative. Studies by Farikah et al. (2022), Pasi et al. (2019), Mihić & Završki (2017), and Tiwow et al. (2023) support this positive impact. Teachers believed that with more experience, they could better address PJBL challenges. Overall, PJBL created a cooperative classroom atmosphere that encouraged student participation in language learning.

Challenges in facilitating from school

The study revealed that teachers faced challenges facilitating PJBL due to inadequate school resources like electricity, internet, and multimedia support. This finding aligns with Cintang et al. (2018), which noted that even professional teachers face obstacles integrating PJBL, mainly due to insufficient financial support. Implementing PJBL requires tools and materials, but these costs can be managed using classroom cash or school finances, and materials can be adjusted based on available resources. Similarly, Shaban Aldabbus (2018) found that many schools in Bahrain needed more infrastructure to implement PJBL due to financial constraints. Despite these challenges, competent teachers found ways to continue PJBL. The study concludes with suggestions and recommendations to assist teachers, schools, and decision-makers implement PJBL effectively.

The study found that English Transformational teachers did not face challenges in classroom management, technology utilization, and student evaluation, owing to their training and experience. The Transformational teacher program, which includes quality PJBL training, workshops, and webinars, significantly improved their ability to implement Project-based Learning (PJBL); this aligns with the findings by Madhakomala et al. (2022) and Tesalonika et al. (2022). Training modules and workshops in the Merdeka curriculum enhanced teachers' pedagogical competencies, including project-based learning materials and tools like Google Workspace. As Mujiburrahman et al. (2022) noted, national webinars helped teachers understand and implement PJBL models tailored to their students' needs. Additionally, teacher collaboration facilitated the exchange of ideas and best practices, enhancing teaching effectiveness. This finding is supported by Sijabat et al. (2022), who emphasized that active discussion and collaboration between teachers and stakeholders can improve the quality implementation of PJBL teaching.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that despite teachers undergoing training as English Transformational teachers, they still encounter challenges when implementing Project-based learning. The research investigates the difficulties faced by English Transformational teachers in integrating project-based learning (PJBL) into a liberated curriculum. These teachers encounter several challenges. Firstly, time management is a significant issue due to unexpected situations and conditions in the field that disrupt the teacher's planned schedule, necessitating adjustments to lesson planning. Secondly, there is a challenge in supporting and supervising student learning, particularly during group work outside of class hours, making it difficult for teachers to provide assistance, supervision, and individual recognition within the

group. Thirdly, there is difficulty in facilitating from the school's end due to inadequate facilities such as internet, multimedia, or other equipment in the classroom, prompting teachers to devise alternative solutions to ensure the implementation of Project-based learning.

However, the study found no issues with classroom management, technology use, and student evaluation, attributing it to the training provided by the Transformational teacher program, which equips teachers with necessary skills and knowledge. The study does acknowledge limitations such as sample size and geographical constraints. It emphasizes that each educational context presents unique challenges in implementing PJBL, including resource availability, administrative support, and teacher capabilities. The study suggests that future research should address these limitations by including larger and more diverse samples, as well as exploring additional dimensions of PJBL integration. This approach would help in developing effective strategies and training programs to better support teachers, ultimately creating a more dynamic, student-centered learning environment.

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