

Empowering Future Professionals: A Project-Based Learning and Positive Psychology Model for Academic Writing in an EFL Context

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Abstract

Academic writing is a cornerstone of higher education, yet for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, it presents significant challenges related to linguistic competence, genre mastery, and writing anxiety. This study investigates the impact of a novel pedagogical model integrating Project-Based Learning (PjBL) and Positive Psychology (PP) on multiple dimensions of student engagement. The study was conducted within a compulsory "Academic Writing for Professionals" course for English Literature students at Universitas Negeri Makassar (UNM). Employing a mixed-methods, quasi-experimental design with 65 third-year students, the intervention group (n=33) engaged with the PjBL-PP model, while a comparison group (n=32) followed a traditional curriculum. Data were collected via pre- and post-tests measuring academic writing self-efficacy, writing apprehension, and a multi-dimensional student engagement scale (cognitive, behavioral, emotional). Qualitative data from project portfolios and semi-structured interviews were used to explore these dimensions and the concept of social presence. ANCOVA results showed the intervention group demonstrated significantly higher cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement, and higher self-efficacy ($p < .001$), alongside a significant reduction in writing apprehension ($p < .001$). Qualitative analysis revealed how the model fostered deep cognitive processing through authentic tasks, promoted sustained behavioral effort, created a positive emotional climate, and established a strong sense of social presence. This study provides a robust framework for transforming academic writing instruction, demonstrating that the synergy of PjBL and PP cultivates the holistic engagement necessary for EFL students to become confident and competent professional writers.

Keywords: *Project-Based Learning (PjBL), Positive Psychology, Academic Writing, Student Engagement, Social Presence.*

INTRODUCTION

The ability to produce clear, sophisticated, and genre-appropriate academic writing is a fundamental outcome of higher education. For students in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

context, however, the academic writing course is often a site of significant struggle. Beyond linguistic hurdles, a major challenge is fostering deep and sustained student engagement—a multidimensional construct encompassing the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional investment students make in their learning (Fredricks et al., 2004; Ketonen et al., 2023). Traditional, product-oriented pedagogy, with its focus on grammatical accuracy and decontextualized tasks, often fails to engage students on these multiple levels, leading to surface-level learning, disengagement, and writing apprehension (Hyland, 2016; Horwitz et al., 1986).

This study addresses these challenges within the "Academic Writing for Professionals" course at Universitas Negeri Makassar (UNM). The core problem is not just a skills deficit, but an engagement deficit. To cultivate a more effective learning environment, this study designed and evaluated an innovative pedagogical model that synergizes two powerful student-centered frameworks: Project-Based Learning (PjBL) and Positive Psychology (PP). We argue that PjBL provides the authentic, purposeful context necessary to drive cognitive and behavioral engagement (Thomas, 2000), while PP provides the affective scaffolding to foster emotional engagement and a strong sense of social presence—the feeling of community and connection among learners (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Kreijns et al., 2024).

While PjBL and PP have been explored separately, their deliberate integration as a model to foster multi-dimensional engagement in academic writing remains a significant research gap. Therefore, this study argues that an integrated PjBL-PP model can significantly enhance EFL students' academic writing competence by fostering cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement, and by building a strong sense of social presence within the classroom.

A Multi-Dimensional View of Student Engagement

Student engagement is a critical predictor of academic success and is best understood as a multi-faceted construct. Fredricks et al. (2004) provide a widely adopted framework that identifies three key dimensions:

- a. Behavioral Engagement: Involves participation in academic and social activities, including effort, persistence, and adherence to classroom norms.
- b. Emotional Engagement: Encompasses students' affective reactions to the class, including interest, a sense of belonging, and the absence of negative emotions like anxiety or boredom.
- c. Cognitive Engagement: Refers to the psychological investment in learning, including a willingness to tackle complex ideas, the use of deep learning strategies, and self-regulation.

A related and crucial concept, particularly in collaborative learning environments, is social presence, defined as the degree to which learners feel personally connected to one another in a mediated environment (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997). High social presence is linked to greater satisfaction and deeper learning. An effective pedagogy for academic writing must therefore aim to foster all of these dimensions.

Adopting this holistic framework is particularly vital for developing future teaching strategies in the EFL context. Focusing on emotional engagement addresses the root cause of many learning barriers, as language anxiety can prevent students from taking necessary risks. Targeting cognitive engagement ensures that teaching strategies promote deep critical thinking in English, rather than surface-level memorization. Encouraging behavioral engagement moves students from a passive to an active role, which is essential for language practice and fluency. Finally, cultivating social presence transforms the classroom into a supportive community where students can practice and

learn from one another, a critical factor when opportunities to use English outside the classroom are limited.

Fostering Engagement and Presence with PjBL and PP

The integrated PjBL-PP model is theoretically grounded in its potential to target these distinct dimensions. Project-Based Learning, by its very nature, is designed to enhance behavioral and cognitive engagement. The authentic, long-term project demands sustained effort and participation (behavioral), while the complexity of the problem requires students to think critically, synthesize information, and self-regulate their learning (cognitive) (Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Guo et al., 2020).

However, PjBL alone may not be sufficient to guarantee emotional engagement or social presence. The challenges of a complex project and group work can lead to stress and conflict. This is where Positive Psychology provides the essential support. By fostering a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006; Muminov & Vildanov, 2024) and creating psychological safety (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Castro-Alonso et al., 2023), PP interventions directly target emotional engagement, reducing anxiety and building a positive classroom climate. Furthermore, PP exercises that promote effective communication and collaboration are instrumental in building the sense of trust and connection that underpins social presence.

The Rationale for an Integrated Approach

The decision to integrate PjBL and PP was a direct response to the primary challenges of authenticity and anxiety in EFL academic writing. PjBL was selected to address the problem of motivation and relevance; by grounding the course in an authentic project with a real-world purpose, it provides a compelling reason for students to engage cognitively and behaviorally. The project moves writing from a decontextualized exercise to a meaningful professional task.

Simultaneously, Positive Psychology was integrated to address the significant emotional barriers that can paralyze EFL writers. Writing in a foreign language is an inherently vulnerable act, and the fear of judgment can stifle creativity and risk-taking. PP interventions were chosen specifically to create a climate of psychological safety, foster emotional engagement by reducing anxiety, and build a strong sense of social presence. This supportive community transforms the often-isolating act of writing into a collaborative, encouraging experience. In essence, PjBL provides the authentic, challenging task, while PP provides the essential psychological support that empowers students to meet that challenge successfully.

The Integrated PjBL-PP Pedagogical Model

The pedagogical model was designed around a single, semester-long project: student groups, acting as "consulting teams," had to identify a real-world communication problem in a local Makassar-based organization and develop a comprehensive written proposal to solve it.

Table 1. Phased Structure of the Integrated PjBL-PP Course

Phase	Weeks	Core Focus & PjBL Component	Integrated PP Interventions	Target Engagement Dimension
Phase 1: Project Inception	1-4	Identifying a real-world problem. Writing a Project Charter and Annotated Bibliography.	Team-building exercises based on character strengths. Growth Mindset training.	Social Presence, Emotional
Phase 2: Research & Analysis	5-9	Conducting needs analysis. Writing a Literature Review and Methodology section.	Peer Feedback Training using appreciative inquiry. Resilience exercises.	Cognitive, Behavioral
Phase 3: Solution & Synthesis	10-14	Developing a proposed solution. Writing the full Professional Proposal and preparing a final presentation.	"Best Self" visualization for confidence. "Celebration of Accomplishment" showcase.	Emotional, Cognitive

METHOD

Research Design

To evaluate the impact of the integrated PjBL-PP pedagogical model, this study employed a mixed-methods research design. This approach was chosen for its ability to provide a comprehensive analysis, enabling a synergy where quantitative data measures the extent of change while qualitative data explains the process and context behind those changes. This triangulation of data strengthens the validity and depth of the study's conclusions.

The study utilized a pragmatic, quasi-experimental, pre-test/post-test design. A true experiment with random assignment was not feasible in this university setting, making this design the most rigorous alternative. The pre-test/post-test structure was essential to measure change over time. To control for the significant confounding variable of instructor personality and style, the same instructor (the principal researcher) taught both the comparison and intervention groups across the same semester.

- a. Comparison Group (n=32): This group was taught by using a traditional, product-oriented curriculum.
- b. Intervention Group (n=33): This group was taught by using the integrated PjBL-PP model.

This single-instructor design is a crucial methodological strength, as it ensures that any observed differences between the groups can be more confidently attributed to the pedagogical model itself, rather than to differences between two individual teachers.

Participants

Participants were 65 third-year English Literature students at UNM enrolled in the compulsory "Academic Writing for Professionals" course across two semesters. This cohort was chosen purposively as they are at a critical point in their academic development: they possess sufficient English proficiency for complex tasks but have not yet received formal training in professional writing. Crucially, the course is directly relevant to their upcoming final-year thesis (skripsi) and future careers, making them a highly motivated and appropriate group to study.

Data Collection Instruments and Measures

The selection of instruments was guided by the study's focus on multi-dimensional engagement and its affective correlates. Each instrument was chosen for its established validity and direct alignment with the research questions.

a. Quantitative Data:

- 1) Writing Apprehension Test (WAT): This classic, validated instrument (Daly & Miller, 1975) was used to directly measure the central problem of writing anxiety.
- 2) Academic Writing Self-Efficacy Scale (AWSS): Adapted from Zimmerman & Bandura (1994), this scale was chosen because self-efficacy is a robust predictor of academic persistence and allowed for a direct measure of students' confidence in their writing abilities.
- 3) Student Engagement in English Scale (SEES): This instrument was selected because it aligns perfectly with the study's theoretical framework, allowing for the distinct measurement of cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement.

b. Qualitative Data:

- 1) Project Portfolios: These were collected to provide direct, tangible evidence of the students' writing process and development over time, allowing for an analysis of the final written product.
- 2) Semi-Structured Interviews: Interviews were chosen to understand the students' lived experiences, providing rich, narrative data to explain the "why" behind the quantitative results.

Data Analysis

- a. Quantitative Analysis: Data were analyzed using Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA). This statistical test was chosen over a simpler t-test because it is more powerful and precise for a quasi-experimental design. By using the pre-test scores as a covariate, ANCOVA statistically controls for any initial differences between the groups, allowing for a more accurate assessment of the intervention's true effect.
- b. Qualitative Analysis: Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method was selected for its systematic yet flexible approach to identifying the key patterns (themes) within the rich data from interviews and reflections, making it ideal for understanding the nuances of the student experience.

FINDINGS

Quantitative Results

The quantitative findings provide a clear picture of the pedagogical model's impact. The Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) revealed statistically significant differences between the intervention group and the comparison group on all key outcome measures after controlling for pre-test scores. Table 2 summarizes these results.

Table 2. Summary of ANCOVA Results for Outcome Variables

Variable	Group	Pre-Test M (SD)	Post-Test M (SD)	Adjusted Post-Test M	F(1, 62)	p	Partial η^2
Writing Self-Efficacy (AWSS)	Intervention	3.52 (0.91)	5.95 (0.80)	5.93	25.11	<.001	.288
	Comparison	3.48 (0.89)	4.10 (1.05)	4.12			
Writing Apprehension (WAT)	Intervention	3.88 (0.95)	2.15 (0.75)	2.17	22.45	<.001	.266
	Comparison	3.92 (0.92)	3.55 (1.01)	3.53			
Overall Engagement (SEES)	Intervention	3.21 (0.85)	4.55 (0.65)	4.54	20.18	<.001	.245
	Comparison	3.18 (0.82)	3.40 (0.90)	3.41			

The results indicate that the PjBL-PP model had a powerful and meaningful effect. For Writing Self-Efficacy, the intervention group's significantly higher adjusted post-test means ($M = 5.93$) compared to the comparison group ($M = 4.12$) demonstrates a substantial increase in students' confidence in their writing abilities. The large effect size (Partial $\eta^2 = .288$) signifies that the intervention was a primary driver of this change.

Crucially, the model was highly effective at addressing the core problem of anxiety. The intervention group's adjusted post-test mean on Writing Apprehension ($M = 2.17$) was significantly lower than the comparison group's ($M = 3.53$), again with a large effect size. This provides strong statistical evidence that the model created a less stressful and more supportive learning environment.

Finally, the significant difference in Overall Engagement confirms the effectiveness of the model in motivating students. The large effect size suggests that students in the intervention group were not just more confident and less anxious, but also more actively invested—cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally—in the learning process. These quantitative results set the stage for the qualitative findings, which explore the "why" behind these significant statistical changes.

Qualitative Results

Thematic analysis of student interviews and portfolio reflections revealed four major themes that explain how the PjBL-PP model fostered holistic engagement.

Theme 1: Cognitive Engagement: Developing an Authentic Professional Voice

The real-world project pushed students beyond the surface-level application of rules, fostering deep cognitive engagement. The authenticity of the task required a fundamental shift in their thinking about writing. As one student explained:

"Before, when we write an essay, we just follow the rule from the lecturer. But for this project, we had to think... who is our client? What do they really need to hear? Our writing became like a strategy, not just an assignment. We had to be persuasive, not just correct."

This statement illustrates a move from a simple reproductive cognitive task (following rules) to a complex productive one (developing a strategy). The "why" behind this shift was the presence of a real audience. Students were no longer just writing to demonstrate competence to a teacher; they were writing to solve a communication problem for a client. This required them to analyze audience needs, synthesize research, and make strategic rhetorical choices, all hallmarks of high cognitive engagement. Another student's reflection highlights this strategic thinking:

"The hardest part was the literature review. Not just finding sources, but choosing what was important for our client at the local tourism office. We had to cut a lot of theory and focus only on practical solutions. It made my thinking sharper."

Theme 2: Behavioral Engagement: Sustained Effort Through Meaningful Work

The project's authentic and purposeful nature was a powerful driver of behavioral engagement, motivating students to invest significant time and effort. The "why" behind their persistence was a deep sense of intrinsic motivation and responsibility. One student described the high level of effort:

"Honestly, this was the most work I have ever done for one class. We met on weekends; we were on WhatsApp all the time. But it didn't feel like a burden because we could see the result. We were making something real for a real company in Makassar, so we wanted it to be perfect."

The key factor here is that the work felt meaningful. This sense of purpose was strong enough to sustain their effort even when faced with significant challenges, a core component of behavioral engagement. Another student recalled:

"There was one week our data was not good, and we had to start again. In another class, maybe I would just do the minimum. But for this, my group and I stayed late at the library. We felt responsible to our project and to each other. The meaning of the work made us persist."

Theme 3: Emotional Engagement: From Anxiety to Confidence

The Positive Psychology interventions were crucial for creating a positive emotional climate, which directly addressed writing apprehension. The "why" behind the shift from anxiety to confidence was the reframing of the writing process as a developmental journey rather than a high-stakes performance. One student explained:

"In my first year, I was terrified of writing in English. So much anxiety. But this class was different. The 'growth mindset' idea... that it's okay to make mistakes and learn... it really changed my feeling. The focus was on improving, not on being perfect from the start."

This quote reveals the power of the PP intervention. By changing the psychological framing of the task, the emotional experience was transformed. The focus on process over perfection lowered the emotional stakes, allowing students to engage more freely. Another student highlighted a specific technique:

"The 'Best Self' exercise before the final presentation seemed small, but it helped me so much. I remembered a time I was successful, and my nervousness went down. I felt more like a professional consultant, not just a student who is afraid of her English."

Theme 4: Social Presence: The Power of a Collaborative Community

The emphasis on teamwork and supportive feedback was essential for building a strong sense of social presence. The "why" this was so effective is that the PP interventions created the

conditions for trust, which is the foundation of a true learning community. Students felt connected and supported, which transformed the often-isolating act of writing. One student remarked:

"My group was everything. We were not just classmates; we were a team. When I was confused, I could just ask them without feeling stupid. We knew each other's strengths from that first exercise, so we could help each other. It felt like we were really connected."

This feeling of connection was built on a foundation of psychological safety, which made the peer feedback process particularly powerful. As another student explained:

"The peer feedback was the best part. Because we learned how to give good comments, it was not scary. My friends would say, 'Your idea is strong, but maybe this paragraph can be clearer.' It was so helpful. I trusted their feedback because I knew they wanted our team to succeed."

DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study provide robust support for the central thesis that an integrated pedagogical model combining Project-Based Learning and Positive Psychology can significantly enhance academic writing competence by fostering holistic student engagement. This section interprets these findings by synthesizing the quantitative and qualitative results, placing them in dialogue with the existing literature, and discussing the broader implications for theory, practice, and future research.

Interpretation of Findings: The Mechanisms of Transformation

The quantitative results demonstrate a clear and transformative impact. The "how" and "why" behind these numbers are best understood through the powerful synergy between the two frameworks. In essence, PjBL provided the authentic "engine" for engagement, while PP provided the essential psychological "fuel" that allowed the engine to run smoothly and effectively.

The model's profound impact on self-efficacy and anxiety stems from this interplay. The PjBL framework provided a powerful mastery experience, which Bandura (1994) identifies as the most significant source of self-efficacy. Students did not just learn about professional writing; they did professional writing for a real audience. This tangible accomplishment is the mechanism that built their confidence. Simultaneously, the PP interventions created a climate of psychological safety. For EFL writers, the fear of making mistakes is a primary source of anxiety. By explicitly teaching a growth mindset and scaffolding peer feedback, the model lowered the emotional stakes, which directly explains the significant reduction in writing apprehension.

The potency of this synergy is particularly pronounced within the UNM context. The authenticity of the PjBL project provided a compelling answer to the "why should I learn this?" question, shifting students' focus from mere linguistic accuracy to real-world communicative effectiveness—a crucial shift for building fluency. Furthermore, in a collectivistic culture where group harmony is valued, the PP interventions were essential. They provided the tools to build a strong social presence, transforming the group from a simple work unit into a supportive community. This made the challenging, often individualistic act of Western-style academic writing feel less intimidating and more collaborative, aligning the pedagogy with students' cultural strengths.

Implications for Theory and Practice

Implications for Theory

This study contributes to the literature on student engagement by providing a practical demonstration of how the three dimensions—cognitive, behavioral, and emotional—are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. It suggests that interventions targeting only one dimension (e.g., a cognitively challenging task without emotional support) may be less effective. Furthermore, it highlights the crucial role of social presence as a facilitator of all three forms of engagement in a collaborative learning context.

Implications for Practice

The findings offer several practical implications for educators seeking to create more engaging and effective writing courses:

- a. **Prioritize Purpose and Authenticity:** The findings compel educators to move beyond decontextualized exercises. Designing projects that connect to students' local context or professional aspirations is the key to sparking the intrinsic motivation needed for deep cognitive and sustained behavioral engagement.
- b. **Teach the Affective Alongside the Cognitive:** This study shows that humanizing the teaching process is essential. Instructors can integrate simple, low-prep PP interventions like mindfulness exercises, growth mindset discussions, and structured peer feedback to address the whole student, recognizing that emotional well-being is not separate from, but essential for, academic growth.
- c. **Scaffold Collaboration Carefully:** Group work is not inherently effective. The results indicate that creating psychological safety and social presence is what transforms a group into a high-functioning learning community. This can be achieved through PP exercises at the start of a project to help teams build rapport and establish norms for safe communication.
- d. **Embrace a Holistic View of the Instructor's Role:** This model requires the instructor to be more than a writing expert; they must be a facilitator of learning, a coach for resilience, and a cultivator of community. This model prepares students for the modern professional world, which demands collaboration, resilience, and problem-solving, not just technical writing skill.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study provides strong evidence for the efficacy of the PjBL-PP model, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. First, the quasi-experimental design, while pragmatic, cannot establish causality with the same certainty as a randomized controlled trial. Second, the study was conducted at a single institution with a specific student population, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Third, while using the same instructor for both groups controlled for teacher personality, it introduces the potential for an expectancy effect, where the researcher-instructor's enthusiasm for the new model could have subtly influenced the intervention group's outcomes.

These limitations point to several promising directions for future research.

- a. **Replication:** Replicating this study in different institutional and cultural contexts would be a valuable step in establishing the broader applicability of the model.
- b. **Longitudinal Studies:** A longitudinal study that follows students into their professional careers would be beneficial to determine if the gains in self-efficacy and engagement are sustained over time.

- c. Component Analysis: Future research could seek to disentangle the effects of the PjBL and PP components to determine the unique and combined contributions of each framework.

CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to address the persistent challenge of disengagement in EFL academic writing courses. The findings provide compelling evidence that an integrated PjBL and Positive Psychology model is a highly effective solution. The model's success can be explained by how it systematically cultivated holistic engagement and why this was so impactful for EFL learners.

The "how" lies in the powerful synergy between the two frameworks. PjBL provided the authentic, purposeful project that served as the engine for cognitive and behavioral engagement, pushing students to think critically and invest sustained effort. Simultaneously, the PP interventions provided the essential affective fuel, creating a climate of psychological safety that fostered emotional engagement and a strong sense of social presence.

The "why" this approach was so effective is because it directly targeted the two fundamental barriers for EFL writers: a lack of authentic purpose and a high degree of writing anxiety. By replacing decontextualized exercises with a meaningful project, and by replacing fear with a supportive community, the model created the optimal conditions for learning. This study's core contribution is the demonstration that to teach writing effectively, especially in an EFL context, we must move beyond a narrow focus on linguistic product. Instead, we must design learning experiences that engage students as whole people—cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally—thereby empowering them to move from a position of anxiety to one of authentic, confident agency as professional writers.

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