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Teacher Autonomy and Problem-Based Learning Practices in Indonesian EFL Classrooms: Empowering or Overpowering?

ABSTRACT

In the modern world, students should be equipped with critical thinking, problem-solving, and autonomous learning skills. Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is designed to foster these competencies by shifting the focus from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered learning. However, many instructors struggle with this transition and tend to take control of the classroom instead of encouraging students to take charge of their own learning. This study investigates how teachers implement PBL and what factors contribute to teacher dominance in a student-centered approach. We employed a mixed-methods design, incorporating classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with 20 teachers from two universities in East Java, Indonesia. Findings revealed that teachers correctly implemented only 37.50% of PBL phases, while in 62.50% of cases, the instructors misapplied or didn't complete the PBL phase. Teacher-centered activities dominated 64.17% of classroom interactions, limiting opportunities for learner autonomy. Interview results highlighted that many teachers misunderstood problem presentation, while some believed PBL was only effective for high-achieving students. These findings highlight a need for targeted professional development programs to help teachers become facilitators rather than content deliverers. Without proper training, PBL risks becoming a modified version of traditional teaching. Future research should explore long-term changes in teacher autonomy and incorporate students' perspectives in order to better understand the impact of PBL implementation.

KEYWORDS

Problem-Based Learning, teacher autonomy, learner autonomy, higher education, autonomous learning

INTRODUCTION

In today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world, education must equip students with real-world problem-solving skills (Canzittu 2022; Reeves and Reeves 2015). Traditional teacher-centered instruction, which focuses on passive knowledge transfer, cannot prepare students for complex and unpredictable challenges. Consequently, a growing shift has emerged toward student-centered approaches like Problem-Based Learning (PBL), which actively engages students in real-world problem-solving (Jabarullah and Hussain 2019; Rosyidah and Anugerahwati 2024). PBL

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immerses students in authentic problems, encouraging them to analyze information, collaborate with peers, and construct knowledge autonomously. This makes PBL an essential teaching method for twenty-first century learning (Chen and You 2018; Ulger 2018).

In the context of the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, PBL offers significant benefits (Kök and Duman 2023; Orhan 2025). Like those in other disciplines, EFL students need to develop practical language skills that enable them to function effectively in real-world situations (Feyza and Seyda 2023). PBL promotes language acquisition by immersing students in tasks that mimic authentic contexts where language can facilitate communication and problem-solving (Chen, Hung, and Yeh 2021). Instead of passively absorbing language skills, students actively apply them to solve problems and collaborate with peers. This is particularly important in EFL settings where communicative competence is key. Students must learn the language in a way that allows them to effectively use it in real-life contexts.

A number of studies have explored the effectiveness of PBL in EFL classrooms. In a study by Sirisrimangkorn (2021), EFL students showed significant improvements in language proficiency after engaging in PBL activities, particularly in speaking skills. They concluded that PBL provides an authentic environment for language learners to practice their skills in useful ways, rather than in isolated, repetitive exercises. Furthermore, studies by Cosgun and Atay (2021) demonstrated that PBL helps increase student motivation and engagement, two crucial elements for successful language acquisition. In both studies, students reported higher levels of interest in language learning when participating in PBL, as it allowed them to use the language in real-world scenarios, rather than simply focusing on textbook knowledge. In sum, existing research supports the view that PBL is an effective teaching method in EFL classrooms. By situating language learning within authentic problem-solving contexts, PBL promotes active engagement, enables students to practice language skills and fosters collaboration and critical thinking, which are essential for successful communication in real-world situations.

Despite its potential, PBL implementation often encounters significant challenges, particularly in how teachers understand and implement their roles within this framework. Effective PBL requires a shift in classroom dynamics, where teachers act as facilitators instead of knowledge transferers. Many teachers struggle with this shift, often due to limited exposure or training in PBL methodologies. In particular, teachers accustomed to authoritative teaching often find it hard to shift to a facilitative role, which can reinforce teacher-centered approaches (Henderson, Coppens, and Burns 2021). Instead of fostering student-centered learning, they may try to control classroom activities and pre-determine the learning outcomes (Du and Chaaban 2020; Nurlaily, Soegiyanto, and Usodo 2019). This tendency to dominate undermines the fundamental principle of PBL, which is to empower students as active, self-directed participants in their learning.

One of the key challenges in implementing PBL is balancing teacher autonomy with learner autonomy. In PBL, teacher autonomy refers to the teacher's control over designing projects, setting objectives, and providing guidance while ensuring alignment with curriculum goals (Buerkle, O'Dell, Matharu, Buerkle, and Ferreira 2023; Dieudé and Prøitz 2022; Parcerisa, Verger, Pagès, and Browes 2022). In the case of PBL, this autonomy does not solely mean controlling content but also shaping the learning environment to facilitate problem-solving and collaborative learning. On the other hand, learner autonomy involves students taking responsibility for their own learning by actively engaging in planning, researching, and problem-solving, which fosters independence, critical thinking, and collaboration (Kharroubi and El Mediouni 2024; Sudirta, Widiana, Setemen, Sukerti, Widiartini, and Santiyadnya 2022). The challenge in PBL lies in balancing these two forms of autonomy. Too much teacher control can restrict student creativity and engagement, while too little guidance may leave

students without proper support. While teachers need to provide structure, offer support, and ensure meaningful engagement with content, too much intervention can limit learner autonomy. This tension raises important questions: are teachers effectively moderating learning in line with PBL's principles, or are they unintentionally maintaining control by sticking to traditional methods? The challenge of letting go of authority often comes from long-standing teaching habits, doubts about students' ability to self-direct, or pressure to meet curriculum objectives (Keiler 2018; Otukile-Mongwaketse 2018). The challenge is not simply adopting PBL, but empowering students instead of reinforcing teacher dominance.

Existing research suggests that PBL can enhance student engagement and critical thinking (Ali 2019; Aslan 2021; Surur, Nyoman, Degeng, Setyosari, and Kuswandi 2020). It also encourages them to take responsibility for their own learning (Duncan, Smith, and Cook 2013). However, much of the literature overlooked the teacher's perspective, particularly in EFL classrooms, where instructors must navigate their autonomy within a framework designed to reduce their dominance. While scholars have noted that misconceptions about PBL hinder its success (Henderson et al. 2021; Wolk 2022), few have examined how teachers apply, or diverge from, PBL principles in practice. This study goes beyond the common assumption that PBL is naturally student-centered and instead investigates whether instructors implement it as intended. Previous studies have explored PBL in EFL classrooms internationally, yet little empirical research explores how Indonesian EFL teachers navigate their autonomy within PBL practices. To our knowledge, this is one of the first studies to examine teacher autonomy in PBL implementation within the Indonesian EFL context.

This study aims to explore the complex role of teacher autonomy in the implementation of PBL in EFL classrooms, while offering actionable recommendations for creating authentic student-centered environments. Other researchers and scholars may be able to apply these findings across fields where PBL is also widely practiced, such as medical education, engineering, and social sciences. The balance between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy is also a challenge in other student-centered approaches, such as Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) and Collaborative Learning. In these pedagogies, teachers face the challenge of providing enough guidance to support learning without overpowering the students' ability to take ownership of their learning.

The research addresses two primary questions: RQ1) How do EFL teachers exercise autonomy in implementing PBL? and RQ2) What factors lead teachers to dominate the learning process despite the student-centered principles of PBL? By answering these questions, we aim to understand teacher autonomy in PBL environments and offer practical insights on how teachers can empower students. Building on this understanding, PBL's significance in EFL teaching becomes clear as it promotes active language use, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, aligning with the communicative approach to language learning. Furthermore, this research highlights the need for professional development programs that help teachers balance facilitation and autonomy, both of which can ultimately enhance PBL's effectiveness.

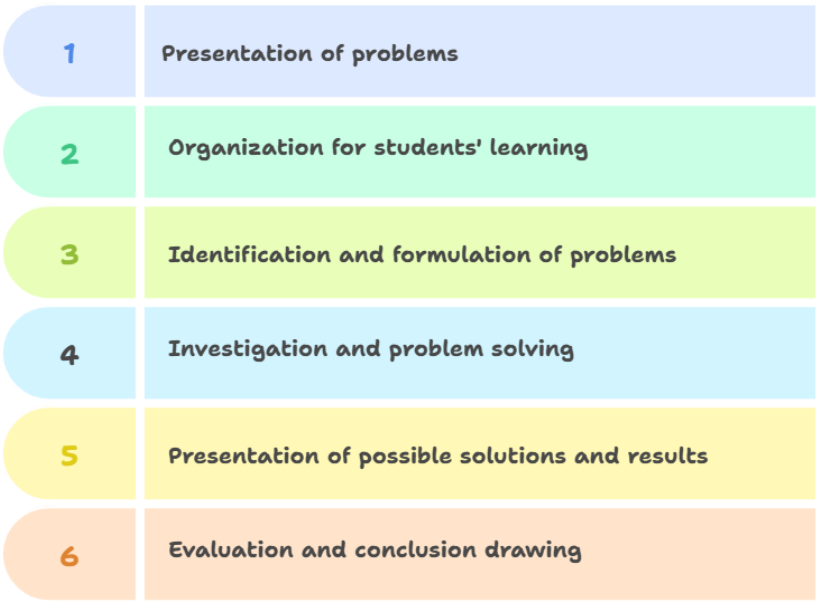
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Barrows first introduced PBL in 1969 as a method for medical education (Barrows and Tamblyn 1980; Huet, Pessoa, and Murta 2021). One of the key grand theories underlying PBL is Piaget and Vygotsky's constructivism theory, which asserts that learners actively build knowledge through experience and social interaction rather than passively receiving information. Constructivism theory informs the principles of PBL, emphasizing the importance of active learning, student-centered instruction, and hands-on experience (Veraksa and Samuelsson 2022). These principles include: (1) teachers should act as facilitators rather than direct instructors, (2) students must take responsibility

for planning their own learning, (3) learning should be rooted in real-life issues, and (4) knowledge construction should occur through problem-solving activities. Together, these provide the theoretical foundation for structuring the PBL model by immersing students in authentic problems that require collaboration, exploration, and reflection. This emphasizes the teacher's role as a facilitator who guides and supports students in constructing knowledge independently.

In the PBL framework, teachers play a facilitative role (English and Kitsantas 2013). Teachers empower students to take control of their learning and develop essential skills for problem-solving. Rather than giving direct answers, teachers ask insightful questions, provide prompts, and help students identify resources and methods for problem solving. Teachers also encourage self-reflection, helping students assess their learning and improve their problem-solving and critical thinking skills. This approach allows learners to take responsibility for their learning, collaborate with peers, and engage in self-directed inquiry. To assess whether instructors implement PBL and whether classroom activities remain student-centered, we drew on a framework that synthesizes key PBL syntax stages from relevant literature (Khamchiyev, Batyayeva, Shandaulov, Zhashkeyeva, Suleimenova, and Sagimova 2020; Pertiwi and Sofi'i 2020). This framework outlines six stages that define both teacher and learner roles at each step, providing a comprehensive structure for PBL implementation. By adopting this framework, we aimed to ensure that our assessment of PBL implementation is grounded in established best practices. Figure 1 summarizes the syntax.

Figure 1. The PBL syntax



Source: Khamchiyev et al. 2020; Pertiwi and Sofi'i 2020

The PBL process begins with the presentation of problems, where teachers introduce real-world issues, prompting students to observe, ask questions, and define the problem's scope (Al Thani and Ahmad 2025). This stage fosters curiosity and critical thinking. When organizing students' learning, teachers facilitate collaboration to help them structure their learning while promoting teamwork and communication skills (Sukackė et al. 2022). As students' progress to identification and formulation of problems, teachers act as observers. In this stage, teachers ensure that students analyze information, define specific problems, and identify necessary resources to lay the foundation

for meaningful inquiry. During investigation and problem-solving, teachers maintain a facilitative role while students take the lead gathering data, identifying patterns, brainstorming solutions, and refining their approach through systematic inquiry (Anchunda and Kaewurai 2025). In the presentation of solutions and results, teachers provide feedback while students communicate findings, compare solutions, and refine conclusions based on peer and instructor input, reinforcing critical thinking (Rodríguez, Nussbaum, Yunis, Reyes, Alvares, Joublan, and Navarrete 2022). The final evaluation and conclusion drawing phase involves teacher assessment and student reflection. This ensures problem resolution, deeper learning, and self-directed growth. By following these structured phases, PBL shifts responsibility to students, with teachers guiding rather than directing student learning. The current study adopts these stages to assess PBL implementation and whether teacher autonomy supports its student-centered principles.

METHODOLOGY

Research context and participants

This study used purposive sampling (Guetterman 2015; Staller 2021) to select 20 EFL teachers (three male, 17 female) from two universities in East Java, Indonesia, referred to as U1 and U2. We chose these universities due to their involvement in Teacher Professional Education Programs (Pendidikan Profesi Guru—PPG program) by the Indonesian government, which focused on teacher professional development and the implementation of PBL. Both institutions coordinated the recruitment and delivery of PBL training, ensuring consistent preparation for all participants. The teachers, aged 30 to 45 years with five to 15 years of teaching experience, teach at junior high schools across Indonesia and have participated in the PPG program for one semester. All participants had implemented PBL in their teaching practices but did not have any PBL training before joining the program. Table 1 represents the participants' demographics.

Table 1. Participants' demography

Participant	Gender	Age (years)	University
T1	Male	40	U1
T2	Female	32	U1
T3	Female	38	U1
T4	Female	35	U1
T5	Female	31	U1
T6	Male	34	U1
T7	Female	35	U1
T8	Female	35	U1
T9	Female	39	U1
T10	Female	30	U1
T11	Female	34	U2
T12	Female	39	U2
T13	Female	36	U2
T14	Female	30	U2
T15	Female	32	U2
T16	Male	39	U2
T17	Female	38	U2

Participant	Gender	Age (years)	University
T18	Female	37	U2
T19	Female	45	U2
T20	Female	44	U2

We conducted the study in a context where EFL instruction is predominantly teacher-centered, and many teachers are accustomed to explicit grammar instruction and direct content delivery. This context presents challenges for integrating PBL, a student-centered approach that requires shifting traditional teaching methods. By including teachers from diverse backgrounds and experience levels, the study aims to provide a balanced perspective on teacher autonomy, dominance, and the challenges of PBL implementation. These insights contribute to understanding key barriers for adopting student-centered learning in similar educational contexts.

Data collection

This study used classroom observations and teacher interviews to examine teacher autonomy and dominance in PBL implementation. Classroom observations focused on how teachers applied PBL and whether their facilitation adhered to the intended student-centered approach. Participants recorded their teaching practice using PBL during the PPG program, and the research team later watched these recordings. We used a structured checklist to document both teacher and students' activities, categorizing them as "correct" or "incorrect" to evaluate alignment with PBL principles. "Correct" implementation follows the six-step PBL framework, emphasizing student-centered practices and student engagement. In contrast, "incorrect" implementation deviates from the framework, leading to a more teacher-centered approach that limits learner autonomy. To ensure consistency, we directly aligned our observations with the six-step PBL model. Additionally, we collected and analyzed lesson plans to compare their intended versus actual implementation of PBL.

We then conducted semi-structured interviews (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik 2021; Husband 2020) to explore the factors contributing to teacher dominance in PBL. We selected eight out of 20 teachers for interviews based on variations in their observed teaching styles, including perspectives from both highly student-centered and highly teacher-centered practitioners. This selection aimed to capture a broad range of perspectives on PBL implementation. The intent was not necessarily to select teachers who deviated the most or least from the PBL model, but rather to include a diverse representation of teaching styles to better understand the factors contributing to teacher dominance and autonomy in PBL. We conducted the interviews via Google Meet, with each session lasting 15 to 25 minutes. The interview questions focused on teachers' perceptions of PBL, their lesson planning process, their understanding of teacher and student roles, and their experiences and challenges in PBL implementation. We recorded and transcribed all interviews for further analysis.

Data analysis

This study combined quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive analysis of how teachers implement PBL and the factors influencing their level of control. The quantitative analysis focused on classroom observations and lesson plan evaluations in order to explore how teachers implemented autonomy in PBL (RQ1). We used a structured observation checklist to assess whether teachers followed the six-step PBL syntax and whether their approach was learner-centered or teacher-centered. Descriptive statistics helped quantify the frequency of correct implementation, offering an objective measure of teachers' adherence to PBL principles. We analyzed

lesson plans to compare intended facilitation strategies with actual classroom practices, providing a clearer understanding of potential gaps between planning and implementation. The qualitative analysis focused on semi-structured interviews to explore the factors influencing teacher dominance in PBL (RQ2). Using thematic analysis (Lochmiller 2021), we coded interview transcripts to identify patterns in teachers' instructional decisions, beliefs, and challenges in implementing PBL.

Ethical considerations and ethical clearance

This study followed ethical guidelines to protect participants' rights and well-being. We collected informed consent from all participants and fully informed them about the study's purpose, their role, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. The study ensured confidentiality by using participant codes (e.g., T1, T2, etc.) and by not disclosing any personal or identifying information in the study's findings or publications. Both teachers and students provided consent before we conducted classroom observations, and we encouraged teachers to provide honest feedback during interviews. The study aimed to enhance understanding of PBL implementation while respecting teachers' professional development. We shared the results with participants to support their teaching. Throughout the research process, we consistently addressed ethical considerations and prioritized participants' welfare.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Teacher autonomy practices in implementing PBL

As discussed above, PBL follows a structured six-phase process: presentation of problems, organizing learners' learning, problem identification and formulation, investigation and problem-solving, presenting solutions and results, and evaluation. We observed a total of 120 PBL phases from the teaching records and the lesson plans of 20 EFL teachers. The analysis examined how many phases the teachers correctly implemented and whether they were teacher-centered or student-centered. Autonomy in learning, which encompasses both teacher and learner autonomy, plays a key role in the effectiveness of these phases. Table 2 illustrates how well teachers adhered to the PBL structure and the extent to which they gave autonomy to students during their learning process.

Table 2. Learner-centered vs. teacher-centered approach in PBL syntax

Participant	PBL syntax		Learning autonomy	
	Correct phase	Incorrect phase	Learner centered	Teacher centered
T1	2	4	3	3
T2	2	4	1	5
T3	2	4	2	4
T4	5	1	4	2
T5	1	5	0	6
T6	4	2	2	4
T7	1	5	0	6
T8	1	5	0	6
T9	2	4	3	3
T10	2	4	0	6
T11	3	3	3	3
T12	1	5	5	1
T13	0	6	1	5

Participant	PBL syntax		Learning autonomy	
	Correct phase	Incorrect phase	Learner centered	Teacher centered
T14	2	4	2	4
T15	2	4	2	4
T16	3	3	4	2
T17	3	3	3	3
T18	2	4	1	5
T19	2	4	2	4
T20	5	1	5	1
Total	45	75	43	77
Percentage	37.50%	62.50%	35.83%	64.17%

From the 120 observed PBL phases across 20 participating teachers, the participants only implemented 45 phases (37.50%) correctly, while they incorrectly executed 75 phases (62.50%). This indicated a significant gap between the intended PBL methodology and its actual classroom application. Additionally, the findings on learning autonomy revealed that a majority of learning activities were teacher-centered (77 phases, 64.17%), with only 43 phases (35.83%) classified as student-centered. Rather than serving as facilitators of learning, many teachers continued to take control of the instructional process, limiting opportunities for students to engage in independent learning and critical thinking. The incorrect implementation of PBL syntax was evident across multiple phases of the learning process. Teachers frequently relied on traditional instruction methods, such as direct lecturing and structured question-and-answer formats. This contradicted the core principles of PBL, which emphasize learner autonomy, inquiry-based learning, and real-world problem-solving (Pyle and Hung 2019). Table 3 and Table 4 provide further examination of these results, highlighting the specific areas where PBL methodology did not function as intended, such as when the process deviated from its student-centered approach. These breakdowns resulted from incorrect execution of the PBL syntax or from teachers taking a dominant role which limited students' opportunities for independent learning and problem solving.

Table 3. The implementation of PBL syntax

Syntax	Implementation	
	Correct	Incorrect
Presentation of problems	3	17
Organization for students' learning	6	14
Identification and formulation of problems	3	17
Investigation and problem solving	5	15
Presentation of possible solutions and results	12	8
Evaluation and conclusion drawing	16	4
Total	45	75
Percentage	37.50%	62.50%

Findings in Table 3 indicate ongoing challenges in applying PBL effectively, especially during its early stages. The most common errors occurred in the presentation of problems (17 incorrect cases), identification and formulation of problems (17 incorrect cases), and investigation and problem-solving (15 incorrect cases). These phases lay the foundation for student-centered learning.

The high number of incorrect implementations suggests that many teachers struggled with these key aspects. Earlier studies also demonstrated that some teachers confuse PBL problems with simple questions rather than presenting real-world scenarios that encourage critical thinking (Wolk 2022). This misinterpretation causes students to miss the chance to explore and define the problem themselves. This weakens their engagement in investigation and problem-solving, leading to a less meaningful learning experience (Pyle and Hung 2019). Without well-designed problems, PBL loses its effectiveness at developing critical thinking. To prevent students from skipping these critical steps, teachers must design varied and contextually relevant problems aligned with the learning objectives (Simanjuntak, Purnama, Hutahaean, Marpaung, and Ramadhani 2021). Well-crafted problem scenarios are essential to foster critical thinking, meaningful problem-solving, and higher-order reasoning (Wijnia, Loyens, and Rickers 2019). Unfortunately, many teachers also struggled with organizing student learning. As demonstrated in Table 3, only six teachers gave students the chance to learn independently, while 14 dominated classroom activities with speech and detailed explanations. This teacher-centered approach restricted students' ability to construct knowledge autonomously and reflected a traditional view of teachers as the sole knowledge holders (Yasmin and Naseem 2019). Such reliance on direct instruction is a common barrier to successful PBL adoption (Prosenjak and Lučev 2020).

In contrast, teachers performed better in the later phases of PBL. Twelve out of 20 teachers effectively facilitated presentation of possible solutions and results and encouraged students to share their findings during the presentations. Moreover, 16 teachers provided feedback in the evaluation and conclusion drawing for students. These stages are more structured and familiar to teachers, which may explain the higher success rate of the PBL implementation (Obidina, Nikolaeva, and Grotskaya 2020). Prior research supports that these presentations enhance students' confidence, communication, and reflective thinking (Riadil 2020). Additionally, feedback, evaluation, and conclusion drawing help develop students' reflective thinking and self-regulation. They foster students' ability to critically assess their classmates' work (Dolmans 2019). This focus on presentations and feedback suggests that teachers valued interactive learning, even if their approach was still partially teacher-centered. While these findings indicated that teachers were able to engage students in presentation and feedback activities, the overall PBL process remained incomplete. The incomplete implementation of earlier phases limited the overall impact of PBL. Teachers must shift from being content deliverers to facilitators in order to ensure that students actively participate in all phases of PBL rather than only engaging in the final presentation and evaluation stages (Salem 2019). A more balanced approach where teachers support learner autonomy is essential for fully realizing the potential of PBL in EFL classrooms. To further examine this, Table 4 presents a comparison of the autonomy in learning between student-centered and teacher-centered methods during PBL implementation.

Table 4. Autonomy in learning during PBL implementation

Learning autonomy	Implementation	
	Student-centered	Teacher-centered
Presentation of problems	1	19
Organization for students' learning	7	13
Identification and formulation of problems	5	15
Investigation and problem solving	10	10
Presentation of possible solutions and results	16	4

Evaluation and conclusion drawing	4	16
Total	43	77
Percentage	35.83%	64.17%

The domination of teacher-centered methods, especially in presenting problems (19 cases) and evaluating outcomes (16 cases), suggests that while PBL encourages student-centered learning, teachers still play a critical role in shaping the learning experience. Teacher domination may limit the intended benefits of PBL, such as fostering independent learning and critical thinking (Silva, Bispo, Rodriguez, and Vasquez 2018). When teachers are heavily involved in framing problems and evaluating outcomes, students have less opportunity for self-directed learning (Worth and Van Den Brande 2020). Although scholars designed PBL to allow students to explore and investigate problems independently, high teacher involvement can reduce this autonomy. Without the chance to take charge of their learning, students may struggle to develop essential skills like critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making. These findings align with previous research, such as Vázquez (2016), which highlights the drawbacks of excessive teacher control in PBL. While teacher involvement is necessary for problem framing and ensuring learning objectives are met, too much structure can hinder student engagement and the development of independent learning. This may explain why, despite the strong emphasis on student-centered learning in PBL, teachers continue to dominate key aspects, such as problem presentation and evaluation.

These findings align with longstanding instructional patterns in Indonesia, where teacher-centered methodologies continue to prevail. In traditional classrooms, teachers often deliver lectures, and students passively absorb information with minimal interaction (Brundiers and Wiek 2013). Research indicates that Indonesian classrooms tend to prioritize teacher talk over student participation (Maulana, Opdenakker, Stroet, and Bosker 2012). One possible explanation for this is the significant teacher workload and job satisfaction concerns. Many teachers perceive student-centered learning as requiring more preparation and classroom management than traditional lecturing, leading them to rely on teacher-led instruction instead (Suryati 2015). Given these challenges, it is important to explore why teachers continue to dominate PBL instruction, despite its emphasis on learner autonomy. To gain deeper insight into the underlying factors influencing teacher-led practices, we conducted semi-structured interviews with participating teachers. The results of these interviews provided further understanding of how teachers perceived PBL, their challenges in implementing it, and their beliefs about learner engagement and autonomy.

Factors contributing to teacher dominance in PBL implementation

The findings from the interview highlighted several factors that contributed to the dominance of teacher-centered methods in PBL implementation. The responses revealed a common misconception among teachers about the nature of the "problem" in PBL and how learner autonomy should be fostered.

Many teachers interpreted problems as structured questions posed by the teacher, rather than real-world scenarios that require investigation and critical thinking. This misunderstanding, often stemming from limited exposure to or training in PBL methodologies, resulted in a teacher-centered approach where teachers did not encourage students to independently explore, identify, or analyze problems. Several teachers reinforced this content-delivery mindset, believing that their role was primarily to explain concepts rather than facilitate students' discovery. Participant 1 captured this view, stating: "I see the problem in PBL as a situation where students ask questions when they

don't understand what I am explaining. It works better for active students because they engage more, unlike passive students who wait for explanations." Similarly, Participant 3 described PBL as most effective for high-achieving students who could keep up with the discussions, explaining:

> In PBL, I present information, and students tell me when they don't understand something. It seems to work best for smart, active students who can follow the lesson and keep up with discussions. If students struggle, I find myself explaining more so they don't fall behind.

This perspective reinforced a reliance on teacher intervention, making it difficult for students to develop independence in problem-solving. Participant 2 admitted to stepping in when students were reluctant to participate, stating: "My students don't engage in discussions on their own, so I help them understand by giving detailed explanations. If I don't guide them, they just sit silently." Other teachers misunderstood PBL entirely. Participant 5 admitted: "When I teach using PBL, I just present the material and ask students to observe." Meanwhile, Participant 6 associated problem-solving with completing structured worksheets rather than real-world inquiry: "A problem, to me, is just a set of questions in the textbook. But many students don't want to participate in discussions or presentations, which makes it hard to do PBL the way it's supposed to be done."

Beyond these misconceptions about how PBL should work, many teachers questioned whether PBL was suitable for all learners, particularly those with low academic skills or passive learning habits. Several believed that only high-achieving learners could handle the independence required in PBL, leading instructors to take control of the learning process rather than allowing learners to struggle and grow through inquiry. Participant 4 expressed this concern, stating: "PBL doesn't work well for students with low academic skills. Even when they're asked to learn independently, they don't engage with the material. They need more structure and explanation." Similarly, Participant 8 believed that only motivated, skillful learners could thrive in PBL:

> PBL works well for students who already know how to learn independently. But when I try it in my class, they can't manage on their own. They constantly need explanations, help, and guidance, which is why I have to intervene more than I should.

This teacher-controlled approach contradicts research demonstrating that PBL is effective across different learner levels, improving both engagement and performance when implemented correctly (Chen et al. 2021). However, in practice, teachers often felt the need to step in and guide learners, fearing that without direct support, learning would not occur.

A major challenge in PBL implementation is the reinforcing cycle of teacher intervention and learner passivity (Virtue and Hinnant-Crawford 2019). Many teachers stepped in because learners were reluctant to engage. In doing so, they reinforced passive learning behaviors. Over time, this dependence on teacher guidance made it even harder for students to develop autonomy, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. Participant 7 acknowledged this struggle, stating: "Teachers have to help and guide students most of the time when using PBL, especially in classes with slow learners. If I don't direct them, they won't know what to do next."

This pattern aligns with some previous studies, which highlight that teacher talk plays a significant role in shaping student engagement (Ardi, Mukti, Basthomi, and Widiati 2023; Humairoh, Widiati, Rabbianty, and Basthomi 2024). While guidance is necessary, excessive teacher control

prevents students from fully experiencing the benefits of PBL, particularly in developing the ability to navigate complex problems on their own.

These findings highlighted a critical challenge: teachers' misconceptions about PBL and their concerns over student ability often led to a teacher-dominated learning environment. Instead of embracing their role as facilitators, many teachers defaulted to traditional instruction, assuming that students lacked the motivation, confidence, or problem-solving skills necessary to succeed in PBL (Joshi, Desai, and Tewari 2020). This misconception was particularly problematic because research had shown that PBL benefits students across all academic levels when implemented correctly. It helps them develop autonomy and critical thinking skills (Noordzij and Wijnia 2020; Virtue and Hinnant-Crawford 2019). This perception created a significant barrier to student-centered learning. While well-intended, frequent teacher intervention can prevent students from developing independence and taking ownership of their learning. Students learn more effectively when given opportunities to explore and construct knowledge themselves, rather than relying on teachers for answers (Khulaifiyah, Widati, Anugerahwati, Suryati 2021; Shimizu, Matsuyama, Duvivier, and Van Der Vleuten 2021). While structure and guidance were necessary, excessive teacher control limited learners' opportunities to engage in inquiry, think critically, and solve problems on their own, which are essential components of PBL (Khoiriyah and Husamah 2018). To bridge the gap between PBL theory and practice, teachers need professional development focused on real-world problem design, structured scaffolding, and adapting PBL for diverse learners.

CONCLUSION

The study aimed to answer two questions: 1) How do EFL teachers exercise autonomy in implementing PBL? and 2) What factors lead teachers to dominate the learning process despite the learner-centered principles of PBL? The results revealed a significant gap between the intended framework of PBL and its actual implementation in the classroom. While PBL can foster inquiry, critical thinking, and independent problem-solving, many teachers struggled to transition from traditional teaching to a more facilitative role. Addressing the first research question, the findings showed that most PBL phases were either misapplied or incomplete, limiting opportunities for student-led learning. Teachers often misunderstood the concept of "problems" in PBL, opting for structured questions instead of real-world issues, which hindered students from engaging in authentic problem identification and formulation. Although teachers encouraged student presentations and feedback, earlier PBL phases remained teacher-dominated, restricting student autonomy. For the second research question, interviews revealed that concerns over student ability drove teacher dominance, with many teachers believing that PBL only works for high-achieving students. This belief led teachers to intervene prematurely, reinforcing passive learning and preventing students from developing independence. Instead of facilitating learning, teachers maintained control, creating a cycle of student dependence on teacher guidance. Ultimately, this study highlights the critical need to support teachers in redefining their autonomy as the professional capacity to balance guidance and independence in ways that empower learners. Without targeted teacher training and institutional support, the promise of PBL in Indonesian EFL classrooms risks remaining an ideal on paper rather than a reality.

Limitations and future research

This study's relatively small sample of teachers from two universities in East Java may not fully represent the diversity of EFL teaching contexts in Indonesia. In addition, the analysis did not

consider potential differences in implementation based on teaching experience. Future research could expand to larger and more varied samples, explore longitudinal changes in teacher autonomy, and investigate the role of institutional support and professional development in shaping teachers' ability to implement PBL effectively.

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ETHICS

Research was approved through the Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember ethical review process.

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