



Review Article

# Harnessing Students' Creativity and Participatory Learning: A Step-by-Step Guide to Conducting Project-Based Digital Photovoice in ESP Teaching

Farida AMANSYAH<sup>1</sup>   
NURHAYATI<sup>2</sup> 

Corresponding author: [faridaamansyah710@gmail.com](mailto:faridaamansyah710@gmail.com)

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents a step-by-step guide to implementing a project-based digital photovoice in the context of English Language Teaching (ELT). While photovoice has been widely used as a pedagogical strategy in ELT, there is limited research on digital photovoice (DP) that integrates documentary photography, interviews, and web-based graphic design tools. Building on a series of DP initiatives, this article explored how DP-based instructions facilitate students' autonomous, authentic, flexible, collaborative, and participatory learning activities beyond the classroom. The process began with engaging students in photo-taking activities, where they took photos of the objects in their surroundings based on the project's theme. Subsequently, they conducted interviews with relevant informants to gather information about the images. The students then analyzed the images and interview data as primary sources to create the DP. Finally, they used Canva, a web-based graphic design tool, to produce the DP and share it digitally through social media applications. This approach has implications for integrating the DP project into Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) innovation and pedagogy.

**Keywords:** *Digital photovoice, SMEs, authentic learning, CALL, and innovation*

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<sup>1</sup> Politeknik Negeri Ujung Pandang, Makassar, INDONESIA. Email: [faridaamansyah710@gmail.com](mailto:faridaamansyah710@gmail.com)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0516-2765>

<sup>2</sup> Universitas Indraprasta PGRI Jakarta, Jakarta, INDONESIA. Email: [nurhayatihisbi1@gmail.com](mailto:nurhayatihisbi1@gmail.com)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1243-1487>



## INTRODUCTION

In the future, ESP need to reconsider technology's role, the impact of ESP on second language acquisition, ESP in new technical, scientific, and professional sectors, new contexts, and new educational notions (Laborda & Litzler, 2015). Therefore, there is a call for innovative approaches to integrate digital technologies into professional learning practices. Photovoice is one of the methodological approaches to qualitative research that integrates visual method to engage students in a participatory learning (Yang, 2023). Moreover, project-based digital photovoice is an innovation in language learning and CALL pedagogy that integrates documentary photography, interview, and web-based graphic design tool for designing meaningful project-based instructions. Aboulkacem et al. (2021) terms it as photovoice 2.0. It aims to provide students with collaborative, flexible, and authentic learning experiences (Dabner et al., 2012; Laur, 2013; Madoyan, 2016). Grounded in a series of DP projects, this paper suggests a DP framework encapsulated from the teachers' and learners' experiences and reflections who have participated in the projects (Anas, 2019; Anas et al., 2021; Nur & Anas, 2022). These studies were conducted in the vocational higher education context (henceforth VHE), where the project-based learning (PBL) policy was enacted. Recently, the researchers investigated the EFL students' attitudes toward the DP project and found that most students expressed positive feelings, emotions, beliefs, and behaviors against it. However, amotivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020) became a strong predictor hampering the students' from the actual implementation of the DP project, such as the lack of digital literacy skills and limited attempts at PBL and photovoice activities. With this in mind, it is necessary to provide a framework for conducting DP in language education to assist EFL teachers in designing their project-based instructions.

*"Digital photovoice in ELT fosters autonomy and collaboration by merging photography, interviews, and design tools, making learning more immersive and dynamic."*

This step-by-step guide was developed after examining, implementing, and modifying photovoice procedures to match the needs of ESP learning in a vocational education setting (López et al., 2005; O. Latz & Mulvihill, 2017; Sutton-brown, 2014; Wang & Burris, 1997). It is a novel integration in which the project did not only involve documentary photography but also allowed the participants to collect information through the interviews. They used their semiotic senses and factual information to produce meaningful DP products. First, they used their material senses (e.g., sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste) to figure out and understand their surroundings (Mahboob, 2019). For instance, students used their vision, scent, and touch senses to comprehend an environmental snapshot (e.g., plastic waste, water pollution, sanitation, and industrial waste). Second, students used their socio-semiotic senses (e.g., thoughts, opinions, values, and orientations) to discuss the collected photographs and interview recordings to develop meaningful interpretations of social realities and phenomena.

The DP innovation described below mainly emphasizes the teachers' role as project managers and learning facilitators. Thus, teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

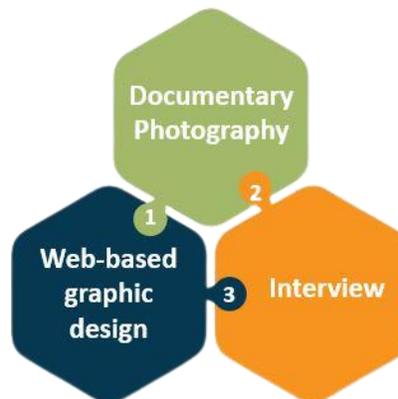
can use this framework to assist students in staying on track and completing their work in a successful and meaningful way. Overall, there are nine stages of doing a DP project: 1) project orientation, 2) participants selection, 3) workshops on DP, 4) project themes selection, 5) project implementation, 6) group discussion, 7) DP production, 8) DP dissemination, and 9) project reflection. Therefore, it will provide participants with the technical knowledge necessary to execute the project.

## PROJECT-BASED DIGITAL PHOTOVOICE

Project-based digital photovoice consists of three interrelated components: 1) documentary photography, 2) the interview, and 3) web-based graphic design. The students must possess these prerequisite skills before doing the project. In this digital era, photovoice is not only about the matter of photo-taking abilities but also about verbal communication and digital literacy skills. Students' material senses can be used to interpret photography, and their socio-semiotic senses can also be used to elaborate on interviews and graphic design tasks (Mahboob, 2019). Nevertheless, social semiotics is a powerful tool for understanding social phenomena (Halliday & Hasan, 1991).

**Figure 1.**

*Project-based digital photovoice interrelated components*



### Step 1: Project orientation

The orientation session includes the definition, purposes, goals, objectives, sample activities, and practical considerations of the DP project. The purpose of orientation is to give participants an overview of the activities and familiarize them with pertinent topics. The students need to know what DP is about and how it works in language-learning encounters. The most important thing about this part is providing the students with sample projects to help them figure out the characteristics of the project. Trott et al. (2018) asserted that teachers must show an example and demonstrate it in front of the students. It aims to motivate and encourage students to develop their imagination for sense-making and meaning

construction. In ELT, for example, the teacher showed a sample project entitled “bye-bye plastic bags” that integrated environmental issues into language education (Nur et al., 2022).

*Orientation# sample 1*

A DP project with the theme “household waste management” was initiated to increase students’ awareness of environmental issues caused by irresponsible human behaviors. The teacher walked the students around the housing complex during the orientation session. It aimed to orient them on how household waste was managed. The teacher showed the garbage disposal, bags, and trash strewn everywhere. The teacher then asked the students to express their feelings and emotions about what they saw, smelled, and touched.

*Orientation# sample 2*

A DP project was initiated to mediate business English learning for business administration students in vocational higher education. The project theme was “Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs).” The teacher introduced the project and its purposes. Then, the teacher played several videos about SMEs and explained their characteristics. After that, the students were allowed to ask questions, give comments, or respond

Samples 1 and 2 show the teachers’ strategies to introduce the project to students. They used two different orientation strategies: site visits and video viewing. Site visits aimed to show the students the real environmental problems to open their horizons and understanding of the issue. They are not compulsory; however, they are options that can be taken as part of the orientation process. Each teacher has a unique approach to the Introduction. Thus, various alternatives can be chosen.

## **Step 2: Participants recruitment**

In this study, the recruitment of participants followed a mixed approach that combined both open and targeted recruitment strategies. Initially, the project was advertised within the educational institution through both digital and physical channels (Jarldorn, 2019). Posters containing detailed information about the project—including its name, theme, goals, objectives, eligibility criteria, and benefits—were displayed around the school. In addition, an announcement was made through the institution's official social media platforms, such as WhatsApp groups, Facebook, and Instagram, to reach a broader audience.

For language learning courses, participant recruitment was compulsory for students enrolled in the relevant courses. However, the approach was participatory, as the teacher negotiated with students on how they would engage with the project. Students were informed about how the project aligned with their language learning objectives and how it could enhance their skills. Each student was required to sign a consent form, indicating their willingness to participate after receiving full information about the project’s purpose and structure.

### Step 3: Workshop on DP

Before starting the project, it was necessary to ensure that all required tools were ready for use. These included digital cameras, smartphones, tablets, voice recorders, laptops or desktop computers, and web-based image processing tools such as background remover (<https://www.remove.bg/>) and Canva (<https://www.canva.com/>). With advances in digital technology, many of these functions could be consolidated into a single device – smartphones – which could be used for photo-taking, voice recording, image processing, and digital content dissemination. In this project, students were asked to follow a Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) approach, where they used their personal smartphones, laptops, and tablets to participate in the project.

To ensure that all participants were familiar with the necessary tools and applications, training sessions were conducted. These sessions focused on how to use the image processing tools, specifically remove.bg and Canva, to edit and enhance their digital content. This training was provided during the prerequisite workshops, which took place before the project assignment phase. Ensuring that participants were comfortable with the technology was an essential step to prepare them for successful project execution.

#### Workshop 1: *Workshops on doing photography*

Photography is an effective way to capture social phenomena and realities (Kirova & Emme, 2006). Students can use this technique to document their surroundings, such as environmental issues (e.g., waste management, air pollution, global warming), business activities (e.g., SMEs, traditional markets, and street vendors), and engineering works (e.g., manufacturing process, welding jobs, and materials testings). These sectors are the only examples where DP can be undertaken. DP is a broad and general concept that can be adapted to any discipline (Sutton-brown, 2014; Wang & Burris, 1997), especially in vocational higher education. In the business English learning context, students must address the following questions before they begin.

- a. What to photograph? What is the theme?
- b. Where can they find the objects?
- c. How do they capture attractive photos (e.g., angles, lighting, background, etc.)?
- d. Where to save the digital photos?
- e. How do they organize the collected images (mainly editing and production)?
- f. How to interpret the photos? What perspectives can be used?

Teachers, as project managers, might not be able to transfer all these skills to their students. They can involve experts (e.g., photographers, graphic designers, and image editors) to help them with the workshop. The participation type of these experts can be voluntary or paid jobs depending on the teachers' negotiation with the relevant parties.

**Table 1**  
Workshop on doing photography

<b>Theme</b>	Environmental issues in language education	<b>Length</b>	3-4 hours
<b>Sub-themes</b>	Plastic waste, water pollution, industrial waste, poor sanitation, air pollution, and deforestation	<b>Tools</b>	Digital camera, tablet, or smartphone (BYOD)
Session 1	[Introduction] - Introduce the themes and sub-themes to students - Identify the objects relevant to the themes and sub-themes (e.g., strewn trash, polluted canals/river, factory smoke, and vehicle emission) - Identify the location where the students can take the photos. For instance, tell the students to go around the housing complex and identify how trash is managed?	PIC: The teacher	<i>Expected outcome:</i> the students understand the project theme and sub-themes, thus knowing what to photograph.
Session 2	[Technical workshop on photography] - Introduce the tools - Capturing attractive photos. The trainer teaches the participants how to use a digital camera appropriately, including its functionalities and troubleshooting - Positioning and lighting. The trainer teaches the students to take pictures from the right angles and focus. - Digital storage. The trainer teaches the students to save the photos in the cloud, such as google drive, dropbox, or other relevant online repositories. - Image editing. The trainer teaches the students to edit the image by adjusting contrast, background, size, etc.	PIC: photographers, graphic designers, and image editors	<i>Expected outcome:</i> the students have knowledge and understanding of using the tools, take digital pictures, edit, and save them in digital format.
Session 3	[Interpreting the photos] - Identify the image properties (e.g., title, location, and caption) - The principles for interpreting photographs (Barrett, 2010)	PIC: The teacher or experts in visual discourse analysis	<i>Expected outcome:</i> the students are expected to be able to interpret the photos from different perspectives (e.g., social, economic, political, etc.)

Table 1 shows the workshops' properties covering three sessions of photography skills development. It is crucial to note that the photography project can involve experts, practitioners, visual discourse analysts, and other relevant professions. All the jobs described in Table 1 cannot rely on the language teachers only but also on other contributors who have the expertise in designated skills. Thus, the participation of several practitioners will provide fresh nuances to student learning as they obtain knowledge from specialists.

### Workshop 2: *Workshops on doing the interview*

Interpreting the visual data is less than enough without factual information about the objects. However, it necessitates the students' social communication and interview skills to carry out the job effectively. The project managers must prepare the students to conduct the interview confidently and efficiently, either offline or online. For the DP project, students must be equipped with basic interview skills as follows:

**Table 2.**  
*Workshop on basic interview skills*

Stages	Descriptions
Before the interview	[Before conducting the interview, the students need to:] <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- study the project theme and sub-themes</li> <li>- identify the goals and objectives of the project</li> <li>- identify relevant questions</li> <li>- get the tools ready for the interview (e.g., smartphone or voice recorder)</li> <li>- practice the interviewing skills</li> </ul>
During the interview	[In this part of the interview, students need to know how to:] <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- get access to the respondents</li> <li>- ask questions politely and professionally</li> <li>- prompt the questioning techniques, elicit detailed information and probe the interview questions</li> <li>- apply the interview ethics</li> </ul>
After the interview	[At the end of the interview, the students need to:] <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- thank the interviewees</li> <li>- collect and save the interview recordings</li> <li>- be able to interpret the interview data</li> <li>- analyze and summarize the information</li> </ul>

### Workshop 3: *Workshops on Canva-based graphic design tool*

Digital photovoice combines photography with digital technology, and Canva is a web-based tool that facilitates the creation of graphic design materials, such as photo galleries, posters, banners, and presentations. The selection of Canva for this project was based on several factors: it is free to use (except for the paid Pro version), easily accessible, simple with drag-and-drop functionality, integrated with social media handles, and efficient in terms of time.

For this project, participants used the free version of Canva, which provides sufficient functionality for most design needs, including image uploading, basic editing, and content sharing. However, it is important to be mindful of the ethical use of free sources, particularly in avoiding any copyright violations. Students were instructed to use either their own images or images from copyright-free resources (such as Unsplash, Pixabay, or Canva's free image library) to ensure compliance with copyright laws. They were also advised to

carefully review the licensing agreements when using any images or design elements available on Canva or other platforms to avoid any misuse of copyrighted content.

Since digital literacy can vary among students, it was essential to investigate their digital competence (Son et al., 2017), especially when using new tools for the first time. Therefore, the workshop included training to equip students with adequate skills to use Canva for their digital photovoice project. A task-based approach was adopted, where students practiced the following tasks to familiarize themselves with Canva:

1. watch Canva tutorial videos on Youtube
2. attend the Canva tutorial delivered by the teacher or expert in the field
3. create an account on Canva
4. upload images to Canva (any images for practice only)
5. create a simple poster using the uploaded images
6. generate the links to the digital posters
7. share posters in the WhatsApp group

This step-by-step tutorial was designed to prepare students for the project. While many students are considered digital natives (Prensky, 2001), initial attempts to use the tool may still be clumsy and slow. Therefore, students were given ample opportunity to practice and become familiar with Canva's features before starting their projects.

#### Step 4: Project design and theme selection

The project design can be individual or group work, depending on the learning goals and objectives. This section provides examples of digital photovoice-based language learning project designs. The themes were selected to promote the students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills regarding environmental issues, business English, mechanical, civil, and electrical engineering.

**Table 3.**  
*DP projects in practice*

Themes/ sub-themes	Contexts	The projects	Length of projects
Climate actions in language education: <i>plastic waste management</i>	Chemical engineering	Photovoice the environmental problems caused by plastic waste.	3-5 weeks
Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs): <i>street vendors</i>	Business Administration	Photovoice the business activities run by the SMEs. It includes sales outlets, marketing tools (e.g., banners, flyers, brochures, etc.), business interactions, products, and services.	3-4 weeks
	Mechanical Engineering (Automotive)	Photovoice how the local mechanics repair injection motorcycles.	3-4 weeks

Building construction: <i>building construction</i>	Civil engineering	Photovoice the building construction problems/failures in the town.	3-4 weeks
Electrical circuit: <i>troubled circuit</i>	Electrical engineering	Photovoice troubled electrical circuit in your house. Provide solutions for the issues.	2-3 weeks

The projects were designed to increase the student's knowledge and understanding of authentic problems in the field, thus generating solutions to overcome the issues. The DP project is a broad and general education concept adaptable to different learning contexts. Vocational higher education has significantly contributed to ESP pedagogy and content language integrated learning (CLIL).

### Step 5: Conducting DP project

Once the theme and sub-themes have been selected, the students can go further to start their projects. They underwent four consecutive stages: planning the project, site visits (observations), respondent interviews, and data analysis.

#### Stage 1. *Planning the project*

In this stage, students worked in groups or individually to plan the project. They planned and organized their activities from the beginning to the end of the project. Then, they prepared all things needed for the project, such as timetable, tools, portfolio, interview questions, etc.

#### Stage 2. *Site visits and observation (photo-taking activity)*

The students visit the location/site to observe the objects under investigation. In business English learning, for example, the students visited the culinary area where street vendors run their businesses. They walked around the area and observed the business activities between the visitors and sellers. They took photos of the sales outlets, standing banners, menus, facilities, business interactions, and culinary products. With these activities, students learned from the authentic business activities that shaped their knowledge and understanding of small businesses. The collected photos conveyed business realities that hosted a lot of meanings, thus allowing the students to express their opinions, suggestions, objections, and critiques.

#### Stage 3. *Interview the relevant respondents*

Based on the collected photos, the information about the objects might be less than enough. Therefore, the students-initiated interviews with business owners, waitresses, and visitors. It aims to increase the student's understanding of the objects they photographed. The interview can be conducted separately depending on the informants' availability.

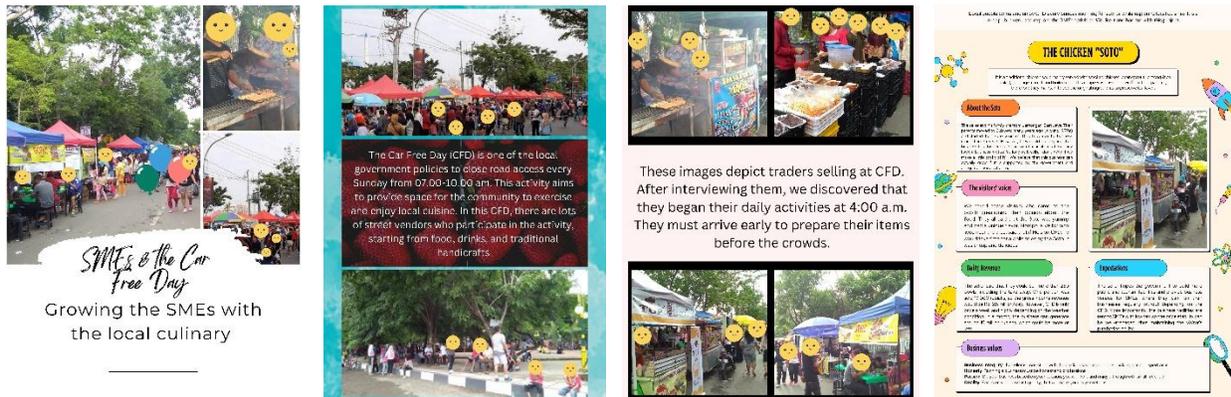
Stage 4. *Analyze and interpret the data (images and verbatim)*

The photos and interview recordings were collected and analyzed. The results were then discussed with other students to obtain necessary information about the objects. The discussion can be done offline and online with Zoom or Google meet mediated platforms.

**Step 6: Create and produce DP**

The main output of this project is the student-created digital photovoice product, necessitating all groups to work on Canva (visit <https://www.canva.com/>) to design and produce their DP galleries. The students will have autonomy in selecting any templates available on the platform, thus triggering their creativity in creating their products. As a result, all groups will produce their own designs in several digital formats, such as PDF, JPG, PNG, GIF, PowerPoint, and web-based gallery display.

**Figure 2.**  
*Student-created digital photovoice on SMEs*



(visit: <https://bit.ly/3DBOhSn>)

Figure 2 shows an example of a student-created digital photovoice with Canva. Group 2 visited a Car Free Day (CFD) event on a Sunday morning to explore the SME's activities. They walked around the venue and observed the people's activities. They also took pictures of the SMEs selling along the edge of the road. After they took some photos, they approached the sellers to initiate an informal conversation/interview (without disturbing their selling activities) regarding their businesses. In this stage, the students learned communication and negotiation skills to start a conversation with the business owners. Therefore, the students were instructed to follow public photography and interview ethics, where they had to request permission to do the jobs. The following is one of the products produced by group 2; the photos' faces are covered for ethical reasons.

**Step 7: Share and disseminate the products**

Once the students completed the DP production project, they finally entered the exhibition stage, where they shared their DP products in digital formats through social media

applications (e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook, or Instagram). In this project, the students shared their DP products within a micro-reality context of a classroom exhibition. They shared the link or the files within the WhatsApp group, and then other students visited and gave their responses to the products. The product comments represent students' emotions, feelings, beliefs, opinions, and expectations, thus shaping their behavioral attitudes toward the project (Maio et al., 2019). They expressed their mixed feelings and emotions about the products, such as likes, dislikes, agreement, and disagreement. We asked one simple question, What do you think about the DP products? The responses were in Indonesian and have been mediated into English.

*All the names are pseudonyms*

I think group 2 did it well on Canva. However, little information about marketing and promotion strategies. I think it is essential to know the realities to learn from them. (Gani)

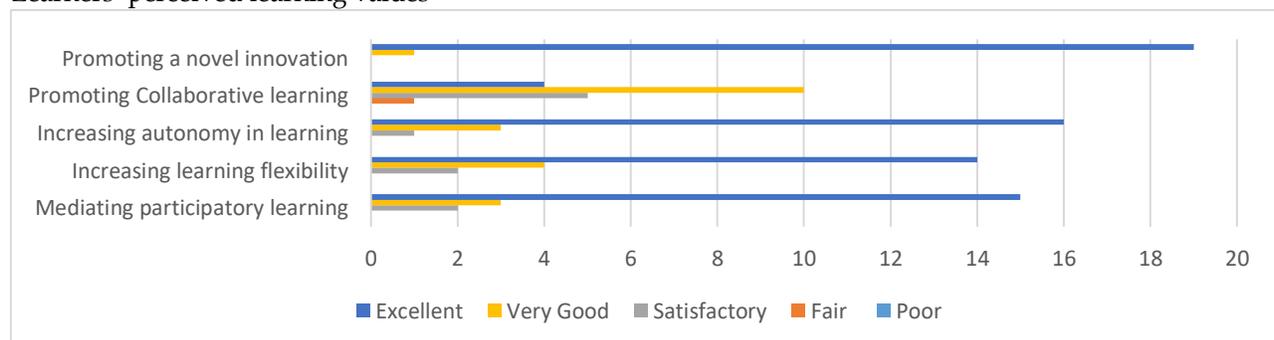
I have seen all the products, and in my opinion, they are all good. They provide enough information about the SMEs, but groups 4 and 5 should add some information about the visitors' views on food hygiene and safety. (Nayla)

The students' responses, comments, and opinions about others' group products encourage them to be more reflective and critical. By sharing the products with others, the product's owner will receive valuable input, thus increasing their awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of their work. Thus, they will recognize the importance of their work (Marques & Reis, 2017).

### Step 8: Reflect on the project

In this stage, a reflection form was distributed to all students to evaluate their own work, including suggestions for future DP implementation. The online reflection activity used a Google form to collect the students' perceptions about the project. The form consists of seven reflective questions (for detail, visit: <https://forms.gle/e3aMZ1D9nCmMHRD69>). It includes the students' perception of the learning values, contribution to learning, the clarity of the project, the valuable aspects of the project, the disadvantages of the project, and their expectations in future attempts.

**Figure 3.**  
Learners' perceived learning values



Student's vignette 1: *feelings and emotions*

Undoubtedly, I enjoy this endeavor. It is a flexible and entertaining activity. I really appreciate the photographic technique because it is authentic and natural. I am normally not a fan of monotonous classroom learning situations. It adds a new dimension to learning without textbooks and exercises. (Obe)

I like taking photos with my smartphone, and this project provides a great opportunity to learn English with technology. Learning outside the classroom is one of the learning methods I have been waiting for since I entered the school. Until now, we have just studied in class; we have never participated in any learning activities outside the classroom. This project gives a different atmosphere of learning engagement, which I appreciate. (Ifah)

Student's vignette 2: *knowledge and beliefs*

The project is new to me, but I like and enjoy doing it. I believe that students from other classes will like it too. I talked to a friend from class 2b about the project. She is curious and interested in the project. However, it has financial consequences because the school does not cover the operational fees. Consequently, we had to spend our money on transportation, food, and the internet. (Salsa)

I think my understanding of the subject is much better with this method. I think it will also work in other themes. I like the project because we learn from real sources and increase our understanding of social realities. (Adi)

From vignettes 1 and 2, the students have positive feelings, emotions, and beliefs toward the implementation of the project. They all believe that DP is an innovative approach to business English learning. However, the results might differ if this method is adopted in different contexts. Therefore, following the DP framework and its procedure is necessary for better results.

## LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although students perceive this method to be helpful, there are several drawbacks and limitations, including:

### 1. Time-consuming

DP project requires the participants to observe the social realities in which they must prepare all the DP tools and instruments, such as cameras, portfolios, interview questions, voice recorders, transportation, and operational fees. They had to check all the tools to ensure they worked properly and practice before the interview. Besides that, they had to conduct several meetings prior to the implementation of the project, so it was a lengthy process that consumed much time and effort.

### 2. Requires specific skills

This method might not be suitable for learners who have low digital literacy skills because it requires specific skills, such as the ability to work with digital cameras, computers/laptops, digital recorders, the internet, image processing tools, and web-based technologies.

### 3. Operational cost

The DP project has financial consequences for the participants, such as transportation, internet quota, food, drink, tickets, parking fee, and other expenses during the venue observation. If the school or institution provides financial support for the projects or facilitates the PBL activities, the lecturer and students can focus on the project without worrying about the operational fees.

### 4. Not suitable for a potentially harmful setting

Learning must also consider the safety aspect to protect learners from risky situations. The DP project should not be designed for a potentially hazardous environment, thus not putting the participants into dangerous situations. For example, DP should avoid observing restricted areas, such as conflict areas, wildlife, chemical waste polluted area, and any other places that can threaten the participants' lives.

## CONCLUSION

Project-based digital photovoice is a novel, innovative, powerful, and visceral approach to mediating the students' participatory, authentic, and collaborative learning beyond the classroom. This innovation is adaptable to CALL/MALL pedagogy that offers a new nuance of learning, thus increasing language learners' engagement and participation in a real-world learning environment. Thus, integrating these tripartite elements (*documentary photography, interview, and web-based graphic design tool*) can provide the students with meaning-making practices and an excellent opportunity to explore the authenticity of social realities. It can significantly improve the student's critical thinking and problem-solving skills. In business English teaching, for example, observing and photovoicing the SMEs help the students perceive the actual business activities from the viewpoint of business doers and stakeholders. More importantly, creating the DP products involved learners' self-navigation, imaginative thinking, critical viewpoint, and beliefs, thus shaping meaningful discussions upon interpreting the images. DP can be integrated with various themes in ELT, such as environmentally-based language education (Nur et al., 2022), ESP or vocational activities, EAP, and subaltern linguistics studies (Mahboob, 2019). Finally, this article suggests infusing the DP method into CALL/MALL pedagogy and digital language teacher professional development (Anas et al., 2022; Anas & Musdariah, 2018; Son, 2018, 2020). Language teachers need a space for continuing professional development (CPD) where they can share experiences, best practices, and challenges in their teaching practices (Vadivel et al., 2021).

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest reported by authors



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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

<b>Author's Biography</b>				
	Name	<i>Dra. Farida Amansyah, MA. TESOL</i>		
	Affiliation	<i>Politeknik Negeri Ujung Pandang</i>		
	Email	<a href="mailto:faridaamansyah710@gmail.com">faridaamansyah710@gmail.com</a>	Scopus ID	
	Google Scholar	<a href="#">Click Here</a>	WoS ID	-
	Research Interest	<i>She is the head of English for Business and Professional Communication Study Program in Politeknik Negeri Ujung Pandang. Her research interest includes vocational English, applied linguistics, and ELT methodologies.</i>		

<b>Author's Biography</b>				
	Name	<i>Dr. Nurhayati, M.Pd.</i>		
	Affiliation	<i>Universitas Indraprasta PGRI Jakarta</i>		
	Email	<a href="mailto:nurhayatihhasbi1@gmail.com">nurhayatihhasbi1@gmail.com</a>	Scopus ID	57216319855
	Google Scholar	<a href="#">Gkxh0QoAAAAAJ&amp;hl=id</a>	WoS ID	-
	Research Interest	<i>She is an English lecturer at Indraprasta PGRI University Jakarta, an Assessor at the English Language Teacher Professional Certification Institute (LSP PBI) licensed by BNSP, Secretary of the Professional Organization of the English Language Teachers Association (PPBI). Her research interests are in English language learning methods and educational management.</i>		