The Power of Problem-based Learning (PBL) in the EFL classroom

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Abstract

Problem-based Learning (PBL) is a curriculum model that emphasizes the effective use of task-based problems to engage students in active and multidisciplinary learning. Through problem-based learning, students learn how to solve problems that are ill-structured, open-ended or ambiguous. Problem-based learning engages students in intriguing, real and relevant intellectual inquiry and allows them to learn from life situations (Barell, 2007). In this paper, I will discuss how the Problem-based Learning (PBL) approach has been adapted for use in the classroom to motivate EFL students to master contents pertaining to Business English.

Key terms: Problem-based learning, Business English

Introduction : What is Problem-Based Learning (PBL)?

PBL is a curriculum model that emphasizes the use of task-based problems to engage students in active and multidisciplinary learning. Through problem-based learning, students learn how to solve problems that are ill-structured, open-ended or ambiguous. Problem-based learning engages students in intriguing, real and relevant intellectual inquiry and allows them to learn from these life situations (Barell, 2007).The pedagogical value of PBL includes: exposing students to real- world challenges, higher order thinking skills, interdisciplinary learning, independent learning, information mining skills, team work and communication. During this self-directed learning, students work together, discussing, comparing, reviewing and debating what they have learnt (Wilkerson, 1996). The PBL approach has been adapted for use in a Business English class in Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University　(APU) located in Kyushu, Japan. The university consists of both domestic Japanese and international students. The general objective of the Business English course is to enable students to master Business English content.

Theoretical underpinnings of PBL

The following are some theoretical underpinnings of PBL:

(1)　Students do not start with a clean slate. Prior knowledge, assumptions and experiences are critical in helping students find meaningful entry points into the problem

(2)　Learning happens in a social context, with meaning negotiated in a collaborative team setting

(3)　Strategies are consciously applied to deal with unfamiliar information, handling team dynamics and working out feasible and well-thought through solutions

(4)　Learner centredness is the focus

(5)　Learning takes place through self-directed discovery & questioning

(6)　The use of problems acts as a stimulus for learning

(7)　Critical reflection happens throughout the learning process

(Source: Republic Polytechnic Singapore, 2008)

The main characteristics of the approach include students taking responsibility for their own learning, learning how to build on prior knowledge and focusing on the process of knowledge acquisition (rather than on the products of such processes). The PBL approach also emphasizes self and peer-assessment, communication and interpersonal skills (Boud, 1985). Biggs (2003) observes that PBL encourages deep learning as students learn for understanding and seek meaning, whereas the traditional teacher-centered approach promotes surface learning with little understanding. Harland (2002) believes that students learn new skills and new ways of thinking through PBL. Williams et al (2003) suggest that students appreciate the active participation in the PBL learning process. This will enhance their personal growth and increase their confidence and responsibility as learner. PBL also encourages collaborative learning among students. Glaser (1991) argues that in small group work, the learner's exposure to alternative points of view is a real challenge to initial understanding. In small group work, students evoke their problem-solving methods and conceptual knowledge. They express their ideas and share responsibility in managing problem situations.

Subjects

The subjects for the study are students enrolled in Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU), an international university located in Kyushu in Japan. Half of the class consists of domestic Japanese students while the rest are international students. The international students are from different countries such as China, Vietnam, France, Korea, UK, Africa and Taiwan. The class size is about 20 and most students are either in the third or fourth year. The TOEFL scores of students range from 500 to 800. In general, the international students are more conversant in English compared to the domestic students.

Business English course

The general objective of the Business English course is to raise the proficiency of students in all aspects of Business English (speaking, reading, writing and listening). The specific objectives of the course include developing students' awareness of and linguistic competency in Business English, exposing students to real-world business situations and management through discussions, role plays and case studies. The course also aims to improve the writing, speaking, listening and reading skills of students to enhance their professional competency in a global business setting. The course is conducted every semester. Two 95-minute classes are held each week over a 14-week period. The text for the course is *Marketing English* (Cotton, Falvey and Kent, 2006). The contents of the textbook studied by students enrolled in the Business English course includes Communication in the Workplace, International Marketing, Job Satisfaction, Management Styles, Team Building and Customer Service.

Rationale for using PBL to teach Business English

Most colleges and universities adopt a traditional teacher-centered approach to teaching Business English contents. However, a major criticism of this approach is that students are often passive receptors of knowledge. The PBL approach would enable students to engage in collaborative decision-making and team-building skills as they learn to solve the problem through group negotiations with other international students. In addition, the PBL approach would encourage students to venture into 'thinking out of the box' as the problem assigned for them to solve is usually open-ended and does not require a prescribed approach to problem solving. As

students engage in solving the problem, they would also learn the processes involved in finding solutions to the problem resulting in deep learning. Through PBL, students would also learn to adopt an interdisciplinary approach to problem solving. This mirrors the real working world where solutions to real problems require a range of knowledge and skills. The PBL approach would encourage self-directed learning as students decide for themselves how they should go about finding a solution to the problem. Rather than the teacher dispensing a prescribed Business English content, students plan and decide the course of action they would have to take. Since APU is an international university with students from different linguistic backgrounds, the PBL approach would also enable students to acquire intercultural communication skills as they work with other students from different cultural backgrounds.

The PBL assignment

In the PBL approach, students work on groups projects, which form the platform for the students' learning (Moesby, 2002). Students are presented with a class assignment with a problem scenario to solve. The problem-based scenario is then used as a vehicle for learning. The problem is presented through an open-ended, real life scenario pertaining to customer service. As mentioned earlier, the PBL approach is specifically geared to the Business English course at APU.

Business English

Project Assignment : Assessment of Customer Service in Beppu

1. Play the role of an evaluator for a Business company in Beppu. You are responsible for evaluating the quality and the services provided by the department store/ shop.
2. Your task: You are to write a report to the company manager with your findings. You are to present the Cons and Pros of the department store/shop, the attitude of the service staff, the quality of the products/services it provides. Rate the shop according to what you have researched and gathered. In addition, you have to conduct an oral presentation for your project at the end of the course.
3. Provide periodic and regular updates in class to your tutor on the progress of your group project.

The scenario is short and explicitly calls for a decision to provide a solution to the problem. Students work in small groups of four or five to discuss the problem scenario. They ask questions pertaining to the problem. In PBL, the teacher does not engage in any direct teaching of content but acts as a cognitive coach. The role of the teacher is to guide the students by asking them to define and analyse the problem, generate ideas and identify learning issues to help solve the problem. For instance, the teacher posed the following questions to the class:

- How would you define customer service?
- What is quality customer service?
- What is the relationship between customer service and profit earnings?
- What type of business unit requires a high quality of customer service?
- Where can you assess customer service in Beppu?

One lesson (1 koma) per fortnight was allocated for students to work on the PBL assignment.

Assessment of students

Students are assessed through a group oral presentation and a written report about their project. The group oral

presentation consists of both the individual and group assessment. Students are assessed on the information presented, speech delivery and the use of English while the written report is assessed on a group basis. To ensure fairness in grading, the teacher reminded the class that 'free riders' would receive a grade lower than other group members.

Implementation of the PBL project

As the topic for the assignment is based on Customer Service, students were instructed to visit a retail outlet, supermarket or a restaurant or office to assess the level of service standards and the quality of the service provided. The instructions for students are as follows:

Instructions for the assignment

You are required to do the following:

i) Role-play a mystery shopper. Do not identify who you are as that will defeat the purpose.

ii) You may wish to role-play a difficult customer and see how the sales staff attends to your needs.

iii) Choose an outlet but no two groups in the same class should work on the same company. Your teacher must approve the company chosen.

iv) Prepare a group oral presentation that should include the following information:

- Name of outlet visited, the date, day and time of visit.

- Describe the nature of your visit or what the "test" scenario was about.

- Comment on the service experience at the outlet.

- Highlight the dos and don'ts that the service staff did right or wrong.

- Give recommendations and suggestions on how to improve the service level at the outlet.

- What has your group learned? Comment on the service experience at the retail outlet or restaurant /café.

v) As part of the presentation, you may wish to enact what happened during your face-to-face encounter at the outlets.

In groups of four of five, students brainstormed among themselves the problem based on the assignment. They had to define the problem to tailor it to a specific audience. Students with the help of the teacher examined the problem and clarified what it is they know and do not know about customer service. They also formulated possible hypotheses and identified learning issues they intended to investigate. They then submitted a Memo Report on their proposed project, to seek approval from their teacher to proceed with their project. The groups then employed research strategies to collect relevant information. Students discussed their findings and peer-taught what they had learnt. The group members then developed an outcome for the problem and presented their findings to other groups in their Group Project Presentation, where their peers and the tutor evaluated their project. Students reflected on the way they had learnt in their groups through an online survey.

Monitoring the progress of students

To enable the teacher to keep track of students' progress, each group had to provide an informal oral progress report of the group assignment. The purpose of the informal oral progress report is to enable the teacher to keep track of the progress of students. To provide a comprehensive progress of their PBL project, students have been instructed to answer the following questions:

a) What are the tasks that have been completed for the project?
b) What are the remaining tasks?
c) What problems did your group experience in the PBL project and how were they solved?
d) What had the group learnt from the PBL project?

After each group had completed the progress report of their project, they were given the opportunity to ask or clarify any issues in regard to the PBL assignment. Through the progress report, the teacher was able to track the progress of individual groups and to provide guidance on data collection. In addition, the teacher also provided suggestions on how to organize the group presentation and written report.

Response of students towards PBL

An online survey was adopted as a means of eliciting the responses of students towards the PBL assignment. To ensure there is no biasness towards the PBL assignment, the teacher did not inform students that the assignment is based on the PBL approach. Students were merely told to comment freely on what they had learnt through the class assignment. Several positive comments by students were recorded through the online survey:(Note: Minor editing has been done to reflect the voices of students on PBL)

Student 1

I feel excited and a bit worried about this project. The excitement is because I really think this project is very interesting and interactive, not just simple sit and write a report, we really have to go to the shop and act like a nasty customer in order to reach the goal.

Student 2

There is no doubt that this oral presentation assignment is a tough task and it will last for at least five weeks. The name of this course is business English, but this task is more like a business task other than English task. Anyway, I think it is a good opportunity for me to expose myself to the realistic business world. And through that face-to-face communication, I will learn more and realize more deeply. Finding something out first hand is totally different from the traditional way of studying in the classroom. Besides, the team work will also be a good way for people from different cultures exchange their idea and improve the relationship.

Student 3

When I heard your announcement of this assignment, I thought it is great that I can interact with my classmates more by this presentation assignment. And I really did it. During discussion it is interesting I can know different opinions from mine. And I think to have a chance to know Beppu City more is great. We had a meeting already, and we also discuss during the class many times, I think it is good to have group members from different culture. David often provides some interesting ideas or experiences. And he always checks the spelling and

usage we use. At the beginning, I couldn't get what his idea is sometimes because I am only used to the American accent. Now, it is getting better. Having a chance to understand other accent is really nice, because English is not only spoken by Americans. In the future, if I have the opportunity to work abroad I should understand different accents.

<u>Student 4</u>

I think that this assignment is valuable to acquire higher English abilities and knowledge concerning the business world. We can get used to using English. We discuss, write and have the presentation all in English. If there is one thing which I feel regret for, it is that we could not have a research in English at the restaurant. If we had done so, we could have learned how to use English in a polite way, which is appropriate in the business world.

<u>Student 5</u>

I received a lot of benefits from this project, I think because we are university students now, it is a high time for us to be aware of the things that are happening in our daily lives. After do the research for this project try to find the main factors for the issue. It makes me the desire to want to analyze things from a more critical perspective than previously. From this, I believe that my interest in other areas has been increased and will continue to increase in the near future as my desire for knowledge keeps me searching for the answers to the many questions that I hold. Through this project, I believe that I have gained a much well-rounded view and opinion of various different processes around me.

Observations by teacher

The following points were observed by the teacher:

a) PBL promotes independent learning among students

Through the PBL assignment, there is no doubt that students are engaged in self-directed learning (Wilkerson, 1996). They analyse the problems, find solutions and organize a trip to the shop to obtain information for the assignment. They also manage their own learning which includes planning, monitoring, problem-solving and finding solutions to the problem. Students are expected to learn from shared knowledge and accumulate expertise by their own study and research, just as real practitioners do.

b) *Students adopt a creative stance to problem solving*

To provide an effective solution to the problem, students had to think of ways to disguise themselves as a mystery shopper or customer to collect information for the project. They also had to brainstorm on ways to assess the quality of customer service.

c) *PBL also plays a great role in fostering collaborative learning*

It was observed that as students discussed how to solve the problem in small groups of four or five, they began to gain better conceptual knowledge through the brainstorming of ideas. The PBL assignment provides a platform for students to express their ideas and to share responsibility in managing problem situations. Different views on a problem are observed, leading students to ask new questions. This helps to facilitate greater interpersonal communication and helps to develop the group dynamic. In PBL, new information is acquired through cooperative learning.

d) *Heightened the awareness of Japanese students to good English usage*

By working with other international students on the PBL project, Japanese students learnt how to

communicate with other English speakers from other countries. This has increased their sensitivity to good English usage when communicating with other students.

Limitations and Problems

Initially, some students struggled with accepting the PBL assignment as they had not previously been exposed to problem analysis in PBL scenarios. Other students were initially hesitant to discuss their thoughts about the problem with other members during group discussions. This is particularly true for domestic Japanese students who are reluctant to share their opinions on the problems as they were more concerned with having the right solution to the problem. Several students were uneasy with the open-ended problem assigned to them. Some students also experienced difficulties with communicating with other international students in their group as they felt they did not have the language ability to express their views. In addition, students were also worried that they may not be able to obtain much information from the shop they intended to visit. Others felt that the assignment was beyond their capability as there was insufficient time for them to complete it. Other students were also anxious about securing good marks for the assignment. The teacher had to assure students that the PBL assignment was doable and that sufficient guidance would be given to allow them to complete it.

Tips for conducting PBL in class

Below are some recommendations for implementing PBL in the classroom:

• Allow students to select members and inform students in advance of the penalty for non-participation in group work

• Set aside a dedicated session for groups to discuss the progress of their research and to provide feedback when necessary

• Use reflective diaries and include a reflective critique as part of the assessment

• Consider having a mock conference at which students present their results and invite another teacher to observe and to give comments

• Use online discussion forums for students to post their meeting minutes and to discuss the progress of their research

Conclusion

It can be observed that students are generally enthused and interested in the PBL assignment. They analyse the problems, find solutions and organize a trip to the site to obtain information for the assignment. They also manage their own learning through planning, monitoring, problem-solving and finding solutions to the problem. As they engage in these activities, students retain information more effectively than studying from the textbook. In addition, students also learn to be creative in solving problems. For instance, students had to think of ways to disguise themselves as a mystery shopper or customer to collect information for the project. They also had to brainstorm on ways to assess the quality of customer service. The PBL approach is more intellectually stimulating as compared to learning customer service through the textbook.

PBL also plays a great role in fostering collaborative learning (Glaser, 1991). As students work on problems in small groups of four or five, their analysis and resolution results in the acquisition of knowledge and problem-solving skills (Wilkerson, 1996). Different views on a problem are observed, leading students to ask new questions. The group nature provides a platform for interpersonal and group dynamics to be developed. In PBL, new information is acquired through cooperative learning. Students are expected to learn from shared

knowledge and accumulate expertise by their own study and research, just as real practitioners do.

Japanese students also learn how to communicate with other native English speakers from other countries. This has increased their sensitivity to good English usage when communicating with others (Boud, 1985). To prepare students for the real work place, the future university language program should aim to develop human resources with the ability to understand different cultures and societies. Individuals will be able to adapt to the cultures they have learned about and recognize their own identity in that culture. They will also gain the problem-solving skills necessary to analyze and research regions from linguistic and cultural angles. There is no doubt that PBL would serve the needs of our university in producing the future leaders for the globalised workforce.

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