

Project-based learning in teaching English as a foreign language

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Abstract. Project-based learning (PBL), though not a novel or revolutionary approach, plays a very important role in education in general and English teaching in particular. In this article, the author discusses the definitions and benefits of PBL. She also deals with the steps for implementing a PBL project and suggests several English learning projects for students of English.

Keywords: Project-based learning, project, English as a foreign language, English learning projects.

1. Introduction

Project-based learning has been investigated in a great number of studies on the global scale over the last decade, but the application of this approach to teaching English as a foreign language in Vietnam is still not popular. Project-based learning is a learning method which focuses on the learner; the teacher acts mainly as a facilitator and motivator. PBL emphasizes learning activities that are learner-centered and usually integrated with real world concerns. With a view to achieving great successes in teaching and learning under the credit-hour system, training workers of the twenty-first century standard, PBL is a beneficial approach to be applied at university in Vietnam. Aware of the importance of PBL, the author makes the best efforts to discuss the definitions and benefits of PBL in general and for university students of English in particular. She also deals with the steps for implementing

a PBL project and suggests several language learning projects.

2. Definitions of Project-Based Learning

Many definitions of project-based learning have been proposed by various authors. Moss and Van Duzer [1] define it as an instructional approach that contextualizes learning by presenting learners with problems to solve or products to develop. As is discussed in [2], project-based learning (PBL) is a model that organizes learning around projects which are complex tasks, based on challenging questions or problems, involving students in design, problem-solving, decision making, or investigative activities; giving students the opportunity to work relatively autonomously over extended periods of time; and culminating in realistic products or presentations. Project-based learning is a dynamic approach to teaching in which students explore real-world problems, issues and challenges, are inspired to obtain a deeper knowledge of the subjects they are

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studying and more likely to retain the knowledge gained through this approach far more readily than through traditional textbook-centered learning. In addition, the students develop confidence and self-direction as they move through both team-based and independent work.

PBL shifts away from the instruction of teacher-centeredness to that of student-centeredness. The purpose of PBL is to foster students' abilities for life long learning through contextualizing learning by presenting them with problems to solve and/or artifacts to create; in doing so, students' motivation and enthusiasm, their problem-solving abilities, research skills, sense of collaborations, resource management skills, longing for communication and information sharing, and language use awareness are progressively evident, and more important, such a process of engaging in various levels of projects may turn their life experiences to advantage.

In language instruction, PBL is a flexible methodology allowing multiple skills to be developed in an integrated, meaningful, ongoing activity. Beckett [3] states that projects are generally thought of as a long-term (several weeks) activity which are part of an instructional method which promotes the simultaneous acquisition of language, content, and skills. A major goal of project-based instruction is comprehensible output which generally occurs both during the project and as the final product of the project.

The variety of definitions has provided the features of PBL. Thomas [2] proposes the five criteria of project-based learning: centrality, driving question, constructive investigations, autonomy, and realism.

1. PBL projects are central, not peripheral to the curriculum.

2. PBL projects are focused on questions or problems that "drive" students to encounter (and struggle with) the central concepts and principles of a discipline.

3. Projects involve students in a constructive investigation.

4. Projects are student-driven to some significant degree.

5. Projects are realistic, not school-like.

With its distinctive features, PBL has drawn a lot of attention and support from educators, teachers and learners. Research has provided evidence for more of its benefits than drawbacks. We shall discuss the benefits in the following section.

3. Benefits of project-based learning in teaching English as a foreign language

English has been taught as a foreign Languages in Vietnam for a very long time. However, there has been little application of the Project-Based Learning in teaching. In fact, PBL has several benefits in second and foreign language settings. Fried-Booth [4] states that the process leading to the end-product of project-work provides opportunities for students to develop their confidence and independence. The students demonstrate increased self-esteem, and positive attitudes toward learning. Skehan [5] argues that this process can help to enhance students' autonomy especially when they are actively engaged in project planning (e.g. choice of topic). Autonomous learning is promoted when the students become more responsible for their own learning. According to Levine [6] their language skills can be improved. The students engage in purposeful communication to complete authentic activities - tasks with real world relevance and utility; they thus have the opportunity to use language in a relatively natural context and participate in meaningful activities which require authentic language use. The authentic activities can provide the opportunity for students to examine the task from different perspectives, enhance collaboration and reflection, and allow competing solutions and diversity of outcome. As dealt with in Stoller [7]

PBL provides opportunities for the natural integration of all four skills, reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Another benefit discussed in [8] is that the students have enhanced motivation, engagement and enjoyment because project work progresses according to the specific context and students' interests. From a motivational perspective, projects being authentic tasks are more meaningful to students, increase interest, motivation to participate, and can promote learning. PBL is said to motivate students as they are wholly engaged in the learning task. Enjoyment and motivation also derive from the fact that classroom language is not predetermined, but depends on the nature of the project. A project may be connected to real professions through the use of authentic methods, practices, and audiences. Real world connections might also be established with the world outside the classroom, via the Internet or collaboration with community members and professionals. PBL thus enriches the lives and experiences of a learner as he is required to establish contacts with individuals outside his regular links of contacts.

In addition, PBL can develop many helpful skills for the students. Coleman [9] discusses a benefit relating to students' increased social, cooperative skills, and group cohesiveness. Adopting PBL projects in the classroom also helps reinforce social relationships among team members. PBL enhances collaboration among learners, between learners and the teacher, as well as between learners and other community members as well. Thus PBL provides learners with opportunities to learn collaborative skills, such as relying on the work of peers and providing thoughtful feedback to peers. Making students perform concrete tasks in pairs and groups is common for foreign languages training; this practice stimulates cooperation and knowledge exchange amongst students and it encourages individual students to talk more.

Allen [10] presents the benefits of PBL pertaining to the development of problem-

solving and higher order critical thinking skills. These skills are very important, since they are life-long, transferable skills to settings outside the classroom. Also, a PBL project is usually carried out in groups, thus learners get to develop their decision-making skills in groups as well as leadership qualities. Participation in PBL projects helps to maximize student decision-making and initiative as they would have to make many important decisions on their own throughout the project: from selecting from various options each team member has to the design, production, and presentation decisions. As PBL usually involves projects done outside the classroom, these activities provide connections to life outside the classroom. As a result, PBL addresses real world issues and develop skills which they would find useful in the real-world outside. Many of the skills developed through PBL are those which employers usually seek: team-working spirit, the ability to work well and get along with others, make informed decisions, take initiative, and solve real-world problems.

Given sufficient time to complete the PBL project, learners would be given enough time to plan, revise and reflect on their learning. These activities lead to meaningful learning. Reflective learning consolidates what they have achieved for themselves in terms of learning and increases their awareness on their limitations and how these weaknesses could be overcome. This means that PBL is an innovative approach that employs a different mode of assessment. Utilizing the PBL approach, learners evaluate themselves continuously. Assessment is seen as an ongoing, varied and frequent process involving teacher assessment, peer assessment, self-assessment, and reflection.

To put in a nutshell, PBL is very beneficial to students in general and those of English in particular. The question here is what the teacher and students do to maximize the benefits of PBL.

4. Steps for implementing a project-based learning project

A high degree of planning and organization is a necessity for project-based learning. Thus to implement a PBL project, several key factors should be considered. First, curriculum issues should be taken in account. The goal is students learning core curriculum as they work on the project. The projects is therefore required to have clearly stated goals and to support and demonstrate content learning both in process and product in order to successfully integrate the content learning. The objective which students follow should be supported by project activities, so that the final project could answer the standards defined in the curriculum.

The second factor to be considered is time frame and materials to support deep understanding and engagement. A good project takes over a significant period of time. The time frame should be organized in a good way to provide each student adequate time for: equal opportunity to participate; interpretation of content, effective collaboration and project development; access to quality subject-matter recourses and professional tools for simulation and chip specialization, time for design process, completion of complex tasks and assessment. Collaboration is another factor which need considering. The students should be given opportunities to learn collaboration skills. Collaboration can be in different forms: students' partnership, team projects, cross-group or cross-university projects. In addition, student direction is a key element of the model. Each student should receive opportunities and support to define a project in own terms with a relation to course content; to design effective project documentation and presentation and to engage them in real-world research practices as well as in self- and peer-assessment.

Another factor is the real-world connection. The PBL seeks to connect student projects with the real life. The connection to the worksite problems can be established by content chosen,

activities type, product types, and professional design tools used. It is important to arrange opportunities for each student to develop real world practices of communication with a purpose; collaboration/ teamwork, project management, effective use of feedback. Last but not least, assessment is to be taken into consideration. Student knowledge and competences should be evaluated as a result of project work and adequate assessment should be based on clearly defined standards; student reflection and revision.

These six factors need meticulous consideration if PBL is to be applied. However, it would be not sufficient for students to benefit if no or little attention is paid to how to apply PBL or carry out a PBL project. As in [11], the benefits of PBL can be maximized when the teachers and students follow the ten-step process of implementing project work. The ten steps are summarized as follows:

Step 1: Students and teacher agree on a theme for the project

At this step, the students and teacher reach a consensus on a project theme. The projects range from structured, semi-structured, to unstructured in terms of the degree to which the teacher defines the project; the teacher therefore should work out the ways in which students can develop some sense of ownership toward the project.

Step 2: Students and teacher determine the final outcome of the project

The students and teacher come to a decision about the final outcome of the project, e.g., bulletin board display, written report, debate, brochure, letter, handbook, oral presentation, video, multimedia presentation, and theatrical performance. They also negotiate the most appropriate audience for their projects, e.g., classmates, other students, parents, program director, a local business.

Step 3: Students and teacher structure the project

After the theme and final outcome of the project are defined, the students and teacher

figure out project details that guide students from the opening activity to the completion of the project. At this step, students consider their roles, responsibilities, and collaborative work groups. After negotiating a deadline for project completion, students arrange the timing for gathering, sharing, and compiling information, and then presenting their final project.

Step 4: Teacher prepares students for the demands of information gathering

The language, skill, and strategy demands associated with information gathering should be provided. As the teacher is aware of student ability levels, (s)he prepares instructional activities for each of the information-gathering tasks. Take English students for example, if they will be conducting interviews to gather information, the teacher may plan activities in which students have to form questions, ask follow-up questions, request clarification, and take notes. If they are expected to write business letters in English, the teacher might review the format and language of formal letters. If they intend to conduct an Internet search, the teacher may review search procedures, how to evaluate an official website, and introduce useful note-taking strategies.

Step 5: Students gather information

After practicing the skills, strategies, and language needed for gathering information, the students can readily collect information using methods such as interviewing, questionnaire, letter writing, and library searches. Whenever possible, the teacher provides relevant content resources to get students started on their information search.

Step 6: Teacher prepares students to compile and analyze data

At this step, the teacher should help the students master the language, skills, and strategies needed to compile, analyze, and synthesize the information that they have collected from different sources. The instruction for the teacher depends on the types of information collected and the ways in which it

was collected, e.g., taped interviews, brochures received in response to solicitation letters, library research, and note-taking).

Step 7: Students compile and analyze information

The students compile and analyze the gathered information. They work in groups, organize information and then discuss the value of the data that they have collected, keeping some and discarding others. They have to identify information that is critical for the completion of their projects.

Step 8: Teacher prepares students for the language demands of the final activity

The teacher designs language-improvement activities to help students successfully present the final outcome of the project. The activities may focus on skills for successful oral presentations, effective written revisions and editing, persuasive debates, and others. The students should focus on form at this point.

Step 9: Students present the final product

The students present the final outcome of their projects, as planned in Step 2.

Step 10: Students evaluate the project

The students reflect on the language mastered and the subject matter acquired during the project. They are also asked to make recommendations that can be used to enhance similar projects in the future. The teachers provide students with feedback on their language and content learning.

With the six factors to be thoroughly considered and the ten steps to be carefully followed, the benefits of PBL can be at most yielded by both students and teachers. The following section shall suggest several examples of English learning projects.

5. Suggested English learning projects

This section proposes some suggested English learning projects which can be used for students of English:

* *Speaking Projects*: Speeches and presentations on audio/video cassettes, oral proficiency interview on audio/video cassettes, picture talk on audio/video cassettes, songs on audio cassettes, recorded talk journals, videotaped poster board presentations or retelling, panel discussions, debates, class discussions on audio/ video cassettes, weather reports on audio/ video cassettes, English corner activities on audio/ video cassettes, drama and play on audio/ video cassettes, English speech contests on audio/ video cassettes, conference/ business interpretation on audio/ video cassettes, and newscasts on audio/ video cassettes, etc.

* *Listening Projects*: TV or radio news in American/ British or Australian English and transcripts, BBC/ VOA news and transcripts, a recorded cassette and transcripts, the course lecture summaries and transcripts, paragraph dictation, or summarized scenarios of a recorded media, etc.

* *Reading Projects*: reading logs, reading responses, readings about different topics, book reports, lab reports, newsletters, advertisements, classified advertisements, reflection papers, published pieces of writings, reading reviews of a movie/a story/a novel, and newspaper article writings;

* *Writing Projects*: Compositions and drafts, guided writings, journal entries, diaries, letters to pen-pals, e-mail correspondence, book reports, lab reports, field trip reports, newsletters, advertisements, brochure or booklet writing, story rewriting, academic paper writings, reflection papers, published pieces of writings, reviews of a movie/ a story/ a novel, and newspaper article writings, problem/ solution essay project, etc.

* *Integrated Skills Projects*: questionnaire project, listening and writing project, reading and writing project, etc.

* *Translation Projects*: Translations of campus briefs/company brochures/ articles/ stories/ technical writings/ travel guides/

advertisements, and literature translation, consecutive interpretation project, etc.

* *English teaching project*: Lesson plans, teaching vocabulary at different levels, visual aids, pictures for speaking class, games for grammar lessons, learning styles, motivation, etc.

* *Others*: Standardized tests and quizzes, goal-setting worksheets, and self-assessment records that reflect linguistic competence of students, projects for different specializations, e.g. linguistic project, British culture project, culture portfolio project, etc.

With a PBL project to work on, students can build up motivation and autonomy, expanding intellectual development and improving a lot of skills and knowledge needed for their life. However, the teacher, with the role of an instructor and facilitator, should provide sufficient assistance and cooperation so that the students could fulfill their projects comfortably and motivatedly.

6. Conclusion

In this article the author has presented various definitions of PBL and its benefits. She has also discussed the steps for implementing a PBL project and suggested several English learning projects for students of English. With these projects and the steps for implementing a PBL project, the teachers of English can motivate their students not only inside but also outside class, making full use of the benefits of PBL to help the students well prepare for future in terms of both the English skills and social ones. In the author's view, PBL should be widely applied at university where students need to enhance necessary authentic knowledge and skills for their life and work.

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Phương pháp học theo dự án trong giảng dạy ngoại ngữ tiếng Anh

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Phương pháp học theo dự án, tuy không phải là phương pháp mới lạ hay mang tính cách mạng nhưng lại đóng một vai trò rất quan trọng trong giáo dục nói chung và trong giảng dạy tiếng Anh nói riêng. Trong bài báo này, chúng tôi bàn đến các định nghĩa và lợi ích của phương pháp học theo dự án. Chúng tôi cũng đề cập đến các bước tiến hành một dự án theo phương pháp này và gợi ý một số dự án có thể thực hiện được đối với sinh viên tiếng Anh.

Từ khóa: Phương pháp học theo dự án, dự án, tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ, các dự án học tiếng Anh.