

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Problem-based Learning (PBL) for English language learners is highly successful in addressing the rapid technological changes. PBL incorporates innovative teaching and learning methodologies that are relevant and meaningful, including strategies to teach language and content, actively engage learners, and provide comprehensible input and linguistic competency. Recent emphasis on science, technology, engineering and economic education coupled with English language learning can be successfully incorporated into the PBL model. This is an excellent strategy because it includes a process that guides exploration in numerous directions with positive outcomes. This method of instruction has the advantage of involving all learners in collaborative activities that provide immediate feedback and reinforce linguistic and content discovery.

Problem-based learning emphasizes the effective use of task-based problems to engage students in active and multidisciplinary learning. Problem-based learning engages students in real and relevant intellectual inquiry and allows them to learn from life situations. The use of the problem-based learning in the classroom motivates EFL students to master contents pertaining to Business English. This model involves learning through tackling problems. The problems are used as a tool to achieve both the required knowledge base and the skills to solve them. It is a system whereby students, working within small groups, generate the information necessary to respond to, or solve, a specific problem or task.

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. Problem-based learning aligns with approaches in which students learn the target language by using it, rather than being presented with and then practicing predetermined language structures.

The specific objectives of the PBL include developing students' awareness of and linguistic competency in Business English, exposing students to real world business situations and management through topic thread, role plays, round-table discussions, brainstorming, and case studies. It also aims to improve the writing, speaking, listening and reading skills of students to enhance their professional competency in a global business setting. 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.

The role of the teacher known as the tutor is to facilitate learning by supporting, guiding, and monitoring the learning process. The teacher provides students with appropriate problems to work on, assists them in identifying and accessing the materials and equipment necessary to solve the problems, gives necessary feedback and support during the problem solving process, and evaluates students' participation and products, with the goal of helping them develop their problem-solving as well as their language and literacy skills. This process generally includes four main steps:

- 1) being introduced to the problem;
- 2) exploring what they do and do not know about the problem;
- 3) generating possible solutions to the problem;
- 4) considering the consequences of each solution and selecting the most viable solution.

ESL teachers need to prepare students for the language demands of the problem-solving activities that vary according to their proficiency levels. These may include prereading or prewriting exercises, discussions to link the problem with the students' knowledge and experiences, or vocabulary and structures that will be useful in finding solutions to the problem. The problem should be an actual problem to increase interest and motivation, not just an information-gathering task; require students to make decisions and judgments; include set of questions that are open-ended and generate diverse opinions.

Teachers should group students carefully to increase their language learning opportunities. In a multilevel class problem-based learning provides an opportunity to have students of different proficiency levels work together and communicate only in English.

The teacher may provide linguistic or technical help to a group, language-appropriate opportunities for students to share the results of their work and follow-up language activities. While students are working to solve the problem, teachers should try to observe whether students are experiencing difficulties with particular grammar points, pronunciation, vocabulary, reading strategies, or pragmatic structures (e.g., telephone greetings, requesting information, thanking). In order to accurately assess PBL activities, a combination of traditional and alternative assessments is required.

The PBL approach emphasizes self-assessment, communication and interpersonal skills. This encourages deep learning as students learn for understanding and seek meaning, whereas the traditional approach promotes surface learning with little understanding. Students learn new skills and new ways of thinking through PBL. This process enhances their personal growth and increases their confidence and responsibility, encourages collaborative learning among students, evokes their problem-solving methods and conceptual knowledge. Students express their ideas and share responsibility in managing problem situations.

Students are assessed through a group oral presentation and a written report about their project. They are assessed on the information presented, speech delivery and the use of English. Students are generally interested in the PBL assignment. They analyze 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. The PBL approach is more intellectually stimulating as compared to learning through the textbook.

There are some challenges with problem-based learning. Some students are initially unwilling to discuss their thoughts about the problem with other members during group discussions. In addition, some students are uneasy with the open-ended problem assigned to them. Some students also experience difficulties with communicating with other students in their group as they feel they do not have the language ability to express their views. Others are also anxious about securing good marks for the assignment. Teachers must carefully consider the problems and activities that students are involved in and find solutions to the problems.

PBL is an outstanding model that meets the needs of our global society by enabling English language learners to make positive contributions through a collaborative, multilevel approach to learning that focuses on problem-solving and communication through self-directed learning strategies and teamwork. By focusing on an integration of skills, students become self-motivated and develop the ability to think independently. PBL encourages self-direction in language learning and content area skills by developing independent problem-solving strategies.

