



PROJECT-BASED LEARNING METHOD FOR LANGUAGE LEARNERS AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

Students in India, in spite of learning the language for over a decade in school, come to colleges to relearn or unlearn the same concepts that they have over the years. Foundation English classes in most Arts & Science Colleges still follow syllabi similar to that of school where the division is genre based i.e. prose, poetry, drama etc. The students don't feel adequately challenged and those who have poor language skills don't really spend their time at college improving their skills as they continue to just write the summary of the story for any question that is asked in the exam. LSRW skills aren't given specific focus and the varying skill levels of students are ignored. Hence it is important that students at least in the tertiary level, after having learnt the language for so many years are given a chance to only focus on improving their communication skills and nothing else. PBL can be an effective way of ensuring this.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, ELT, PBL, Project Based Learning, Problem based Learning, communication skills, language practise, tertiary level, LSRW.

Introduction

English Language Teaching has always evolved over the years to suit the changing learner needs and required skill sets. This century has brought in major changes in ELT methodology where the focus has shifted squarely from the teacher onto the learner and from a traditional theory backed approach to a more practically oriented approach to enable the language to be a competent user of the language. There is always a lot of study that is constantly undertaken to improve the efficiency the teaching learning process. These enthusiastic studies throw new light on different approaches to ELT, newer teaching methodologies and more efficient teaching techniques. Project Based Learning is an emerging instructional methodology that bridges the connect between classroom learning and real world problems and solutions.

What is Project based Learning?

Maggie O'Brien in her blogpost titled '*What is Project-based Learning?*' defines it as an "instructional methodology that encourages students to learn and apply knowledge and skills through an engaging experience." Traditional teaching methods generally follow a method where the teaching learning process begins with the teacher delivering the content to the students. The students are then given opportunity for adequate practise to apply their learning. At the end of this, the students are tested to adjudge the level of their understanding which also provides feedback the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process. But in Project-Based Learning (PBL), the learning is an intrinsic part of the project. A teacher in PBL methodology elicits solutions for real world problems from students. It is part of a long-term project where the student endeavours to solve it in

a creative way. In the process of finding solutions, the students employ various skills which meet the required learning standard.

Characteristics of PBL

Project Based Learning begins with an inquiry into a real world problem. The learner takes the responsibility of learning and through learning by inquiry understands the problem in its entirety and then begins to find the solution for it. A well designed PBL lesson has the following features.

i. Learner-centric

PBL is essentially learner-centric, as the learner is put in charge of his own learning through the project. The project is designed such that it satisfies the learning objectives as dictated by the curriculum. The learning factor is embedded into the project and the learner does it through his preferred style and pace of learning. A learner is deeply involved in the learning process and demonstrates his learning through the solutions he comes up with.

ii. Autonomy

The teacher in PBL acts as a constant source of support and facilitator. He/ she plays the role of a guide and swiftly channels the thought processes of the learners in accordance to the required learning outcomes. The student is given complete autonomy over the project, the methods of inquiry, the collection of data, analysis of the data and the solutions he/she comes up with. This is an exhaustive process and the students not only get a thorough understanding of the concept, but is also able to relate it to the real world.

iii. Authenticity

The students involved in a project do each of their projects in an authentic way. The methods used for learning and research, the tools used for analysis and the results produced are all authentic and original. PBL creates a constructivist approach to learning where students create their own knowledge base with a prescribed framework to guide them to satisfy the curriculum needs intrinsically. This lends a deep level of authenticity to their learning.

iv. Higher order thinking skills

PBL is rooted in learning by inquiry. The students are given real world problems for which they are assigned to come up with plausible solutions. The students endeavour to do so by studying the problem in its entirety and think of creative and constructive ways to approach the problem to either bring in a new understanding of the said problem or think of solutions that can be adapted for solving it. PBL thus enables students to reveal in higher order thinking skills and equips them with the much needed skills in the real world.

v. Real world connection

PBL focuses on real world problems and the fact that students undertake a deep study of the problem and possible solutions makes it all the more meaningful for the students. Concepts and learning objectives aren't rooted in abstract terms and are disconnected with the real world. The usual question of 'how am I going to use this in real life?' is answered as the study itself is rooted in real life situations.

vi. Assessment

Assessment for a PBL lesson is continuous and evaluates multifarious skills. A project would have ensured that the student undertook various activities to arrive at his solution. Hence the assessment can be made based on any part of the project. More than basing it on the solution that the student comes up with, the process by which he arrived at it would have included meeting the learning objectives. Hence assessment would be wholesome and present a valid evaluation based on his skill.

PBL for ELT

PBL has been slowly gaining ground amidst teachers of science and social studies across the world. However designing a PBL lesson for an English class requires great level of planning and clear direction. Literature deals with life in its entirety. So asking students to pick out problems faced by characters in the story and asking them to provide solutions or different scenarios by which the

story could have moved forward can all be accommodated in a PBL lesson for English.

For example, a poem on gender inequality needn't just be a text. It can be discussed in class and given as a project to students, helping them to not only understand the text but encourage them to relate it to real life and see how they can overcome or solve this burning issue. Working on the project would be a collaborative effort and would thus ensure that the student employs the language and the four main skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Assessment can be done at various stages and the student would feel emboldened to know that he is doing something relevant to his surroundings.

ELT at tertiary level

In India, language learners at the tertiary level, in spite of learning the language for a number of years at school, continue to adhere to the same structure of language learning even at the tertiary level. The syllabi follow the same genre-based approach, and language is taught to students through extracts of literature disguised as lessons. The beginning, middle and the end treads a similar path to which they are accustomed to at the school level. The syllabi, the method of teaching and the assessment all coincide with the same practices followed in Indian schools. This might not be an effective method to improve the language skills of the learners as they lack motivation or consider language classes to be an easy subject and miss out on acquiring the required skillset which they would need once they graduate from college and begin to use the language in real world situations.

Students in India, in spite of learning the language for over a decade in school, come to colleges to relearn or unlearn the same concepts that they have learnt over the years. Foundation English classes in most Arts & Science Colleges still follow syllabi similar to that of school where the division is genre based i.e. prose, poetry, drama etc. The students don't feel adequately challenged and those who have poor language skills don't really spend their time at college improving their skills as they continue to just write the summary of the story for any question that is asked in the exam. LSRW

skills aren't given specific focus and the varying skill levels of students are ignored. Hence it is important that students at least in the tertiary level, after having learnt the language for so many years are given a chance to only focus on improving their communication skills and nothing else. They need to become adept users of the language. The process of teaching lessons and exams only testing the student's memory of the facts of a lesson or ability to reproduce a memorized essay cannot be an adequate indicator of the skill level of the language learner. PBL can be an effective way of breaking the monotony and engaging students to take responsibility for their own learning.

PBL at Tertiary Level

PBL is ideal for language instruction because of its constructivist approach. Students have a deeper understanding of the language as they involve in different activities that give adequate practise of the four main skills i.e. LSRW. The activities are also relevant to real life and are thus not isolated concepts. They bridge the gap between the abstract and the reality by providing adequate practise for language use, aiming for deeper understanding of the language by negotiating meaning through discussion with other language learners. The social interaction that is achieved through this method helps to improve their communication skills as well as their critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

PBL squarely puts the onus and responsibility of learning on the student's shoulders. The method is student-centric. It involves a deep and rigorous self-study and a collaborative effort to finish the project. In addition to cognitive skills, it bolsters creativity and critical thinking. It engages the learner in a real-world situation and the student is intrinsically motivated to find a solution. Achieving the learning outcomes results in something tangible for the learner. They get into the text and beyond. They understand the text on a deeper level and engulf themselves into reading more relevant literature, comprehend them, form their opinions and discuss it with their peers to come out with plausible solutions. This exercise engages the learner to take stock of not only their understanding

of the text but also of their language skills. PBL thus provides them adequate language practice and enables them to identify their own skill set and work on improving them intrinsically.

Conclusion

Project based learning can thus be an effective approach to language learning at the tertiary level as it is student-centric, flexible to varying skill levels and learning styles of students, rooted in real life applicability and promotes creativity and critical thinking while strengthening communication skills. It can be a welcome change at the tertiary level where students can completely use their English language classes to be effective users of the language in real world situations and develop the required skills needed for the 21st century. Language classes can thus use literature effectively to further the language skills of the students and not be isolated texts or literature of a bygone age. Literature throws light on the all the nuances of life and unless students are encouraged to notice them and relate them to the present time, these great texts might just be labelled as boring classics and be ineffective texts for language practise. PBL can be the right antidote to enthuse students to actively participate and take responsibility for their language learning.

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Author's Biography

D.M. Vedha Priya has been an English Teacher since 2006. Her M.Phil research focussed on studying the challenges that hampered the communication skills of school students in spite of learning the language for a number of years at school. Her doctoral research focussed on the synergy between teaching and technology. Her areas of interest include ELT, Drama and Creative Writing. She is an avid writer of poems, a keen follower of slam poetry and spoken word performances. She can be contacted at vedhamohan@gmail.com