RESEARCH ARTICLE

PROJECT BASED LEARNING AS AN EFFECTIVE APPROACH TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The importance of English language learning has been overstressed for the past few decades. Having gained the status of most dominant lingua franca, English remains a standard medium of communication and academic advancement. In such scenario, many approaches and methods have been introduced and implemented to stress on English language development. The paradigm shift from the monotonous grammar-translation to communicative approach to Computer assisted learning, stand witness to the fact that there is a dire need to constantly revise methods to suit learner's needs and achieving proficiency. One such approach instrumented to advance learner's English language development through meaningful contexts is the 'Project Based Learning' (PBL). Fore grounded on the principles of Experiential learning, project based language learning exposes learner's to meaningful language learning contexts and offers opportunities to hone their language skills through collaborative practice. This paper aims to discuss the practice of project based language learning as an effective tool to improve academic and interpersonal communication skills and create a positive learning environment for tertiary level learners. The paper, also, explores the underlying rationale, tasks and techniques, scaffolding, role of learners and limitations of the approach.

Key words: Experiential learning, Critical reasoning, multi-faceted learning outcomes, learner-centered pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38).

Multilingualism has become a norm than an exception. English, having attained the state of lingua-franca in most of the countries, is the most sought after language for communication. Today, one even associates the knowledge of English language to academic superiority. Methods and approaches to teach English have been a matter of pivotal importance for the past few decades and have been under constant revision to suit the learner's need. Many such approaches have emerged and faded in to time due to various factors such as effectiveness and feasibility. Aim of English language teaching has faced major paradigm shift from its scholarly purposes to achievement of communicative competence.

This, in turn, has triggered much research in direction of designing an effective approach to inculcate communicative skills of the language in any language teaching approach. In a professionally competent, fast evolving world, learners need to keep in tune with upgraded skills to make their way through it. Gone are the days when companies hired people with mere subject knowledge. Confidence and Communication skills take a much higher stand when it comes to employability skills.

COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

Communicative approach to language teaching gained its prominence in the early 1970's when the shift of language learning altered its focus from a cognitive process to a socio-cognitive process. It was looked upon as a social process than academic. In the words of Christina Bratt Paulston "The one thing that everyone is certain about is the necessity to use language for communicative purposes in the classroom. Consequently, the concern for teaching linguistic competence has widened to include communicative competence, the socially appropriate use of language, and the methods reflect this shift from form to function."

Views from various linguists such as Chomsky, Christopher Candlin, Henry Widdowson focused their attention on development of communicative and functional competence in addition to mastery of linguistic structures in the language. It was not until Dell Hymes, an American linguist, coined the term "Communicative competence" that refers to both knowledge of the language and the ability to use it appropriately.

This revolutionized the thinking of many academicians which further led to the evolution of language teaching methods to concentrate on communicative competence of the language as the core learning objective. Methods and approaches shifted their focus to teach the English through meaningful contexts that exemplified functional and contextual uses of a language.

To accomplish optimum learning, it is crucial for educators to utilize best practices and be knowledgeable in both content and language acquisition strategies. Creative methodology, including cooperative learning and incorporation of hands-on activities, is at the top of the list of successful strategies for lowering the affective filter and engaging students in active learning.(Boothe et. all)

EXPERIENTIAL EARNING

The trend of Progressivism in the field of education also contributed to groundbreaking innovations in methodology that stressed on eradicating passive learning and implementing active learning processes. Learner centered approaches that focused on active involvement of learners led to new methods that advocated the principles of experiential learning. Experiential learning simply refers to 'Learning by doing'. According to Wurdinger & Carlson, (2010)

"Broadly, experiential learning is any learning that supports learners in applying their knowledge and conceptual understanding to real-world problems or situations where the instructor directs and facilitates learning. The classroom, laboratory, or studio can serve as a setting for experiential learning through embedded activities such as case and problem-based studies, guided inquiry, simulations, experiments, or art projects".(web)
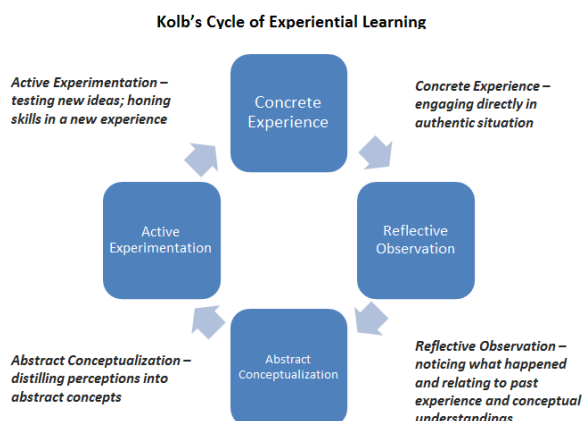

Fig.1 Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning, Retrieved from https://www.simplypsychology.org/learning-kolb.html

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In the model introduced by David Kolb, in 1984, introduces learning cycle that clearly depicts the process of experiential learning. His theory mainly focused on the internal cognitive process of the learner.

One such prominent methodology that advocates the concepts of experiential learning is 'Project Based Learning". Project based learning (PBL) is an energetic classroom practice that eschewed the old school model where the teacher presents information and learners are expected to represent it. PBL is noveau method in which active involvement of the learner leads to self directed learning, in all aspects. It is an open method that does not limit the role of learner to a mere listener of information. Learners are expected to participate and contribute to building of knowledge through a series of well-planned activities and tasks. These tasks are often devised based on practical experience and negotiation of knowledge.

"The basic premise of PBL is that learning begins with a problem presented in the same context as it would be encountered in real life. When presented with the problem, learners begin by organizing their ideas and previous knowledge to define the problem's broad nature. Inevitably they reach a point at which they realize they are missing essential information or do not understand aspects of the problem" (Boothe, et all)

PBL inculcates and activates many life skills in the learner. Few of those skills are critical reasoning, verbal reasoning, interpersonal communication, decision making, and comprehension. PBL has also been extremely useful in terms of language skills. This method ensures effective use of the four language skills – listening, reading, speaking and writing. All these skills are used (than being taught), implicitly, in various phases of the project development such as exploring information, discussing their views, and recording solutions through various group activities. Important components of the language such as vocabulary and grammar are also unconsciously inculcated in learners, through execution and revision of the project activities.

This method of learning breaks classroom monotony and teacher plays a passive role. The role of teacher is to offer mere scaffolding where the learners need it. It is the teacher's responsibility to facilitate positive learning through effective initiation and direction.

Many instructors fret over the fact that it is tedious to 'teach' language skills to tertiary level learners. Especially engineering learners, who already have a load of academic stress from their major subjects, often shun English classes as irrelevant and tiring. Little do they realize that the English language class offers much more than grammar and vocabulary. They do not realize the fact that the language is very crucial as a medium of communication in their career development.

PBL offers an alternate approach to make these English classes relevant and energetic. Through this method, and effective designing of the activities, classes are made 'less teacher/content oriented' and more 'competence oriented'. Learner autonomy and involvement is encouraged to create a positive learning environment. Since most of the projects in PBL are much more conducive for group work, learners are further enticed to be working with their peers as a process of learning.

There are few essential features of effective implementation of project based learning. They are:

1.   Defining learning objectives
2.   Designing the project
3.   Devising methodology
4.   Assessment and Error Correction

DEFINING LEARNING OBJECTIVES: It is pivotal that any method draws a set of learning outcomes to be achieved. It is important to articulate teaching/learning process the right way and focus on appropriate ways to achieve it. Need analysis has to be performed to assess the existing proficiency of learners. The outcomes of needs analysis helps in stating the desired learning objectives. These stated learning objectives guide in efficiently selecting activities, techniques and assessment methods. Mager (1997) elaborated on the three crucial components of an effective learning objective. They are:

- Performance – What are learners expected to do?
- Conditions – under which conditions should the learner perform?
- Criteria – How well do learners have to perform in order to satisfy the requirements?

For tertiary level learners the learning objectives are, most commonly, achieving communicative competence in the language. For better understanding this broad learning outcome can be broken down in to

three component parts based on Mager's classification. In English language learning context, the desired performance objective is efficient communication in the English language (Written and spoken). As far as the conditions are concerned, PBL promotes invoking critical reasoning and problem solving attitude as means to effective English language development. Criteria component of the learning objectives in the PBL entails the achievement of coherence, fluency, organization of thoughts and effective delivery of ideas as successful acquisition of communicative skill.

DESIGNING THE PROJECT

Designing the activity for Project based learning requires careful consideration. The chosen project should be fast paced and learner centered. The project is mostly based on a question (often pertaining to real world scenario) that allows pondering and research from the learner's end.

Project-based learning is focused on teaching by engaging learners in investigation. Within this framework, learners pursue solutions to nontrivial problems by asking and refining questions, debating ideas, making predictions, designing plans and/or experiments, collecting and analyzing data, drawing conclusions, communicating their ideas and findings to others, asking new questions, and creating artifacts (e.g., a model, a report, a videotape, or a computer program)

Designing the project also includes careful selection and generation of appropriate instructional materials, meaningful tasks, formation of groups, and so on. The project design will also comprise of the order in which each task has to be performed and defining the role of teacher. In contrast to the traditional classroom, where the teacher provides learners with input/information to work with, PBL encourages self-exploration by the learner as its main tenet.

Learners are simply provided with an array of option to work with, from which they choose one. It may be an image, or a newspaper article, a video, a social issue and so on. Selection of topic is followed with learners contributing their research and opinions as the primary source for the designed project. The learner's experience and former exposure to the topic acts as a driving force in tapping their interest to participate. This, in turn, motivates the learner capturing his attention, as the topics and input are of their own choice and interest.

DEVISING METHODOLOGY

In the word of Alan Waters and Mary Waters,

Any consideration of how to design appropriate activities for helping learners to study successfully in English has to be based on an understanding of two fundamental factors, namely, (i) what effective study involves, and, (ii) what an effective approach to learning to study entails – conceptions, in other words, of the underlying 'what' and 'how', respectively, of this area of the design of activities. Obviously, numerous other factors also play an important role in the design process, such as sequencing, variety, feasibility, level and so on, but ultimately, everything depends on whether the materials have validity in terms of the underlying view of studying and learning to study on which they are based. (p.375)

It is crucial to define the methodology for any approach as it is the practical implementation of underlying principles and rationale that it is built on. In project based learning, there is no 'right' method. Rigid methods are replaced with a set of principles that provides the teacher with liberty to modify it according to learner's need and proficiency aimed at. Choosing the appropriate project also entails effective gradation and implementation of activities to suit learning outcome.

The project and its activities must act as a motivational factor pressurizing the learner to communicate. This kind of motivation can only arise if the learner feels motivated by the topic at hand. Only meaningful and practical activities can trigger this kind of motivation in learners, where the need to voice out opinions acts as a force to elicit communication. This can be any kind of communication – written, spoken or artistic and pictorial (if required). In an article titled ' *A Possible Methodology for the Promotion of Second Language Acquisition*', N.S.Prabhu gives an insight to 'Communicative pressure':

Motivation in the classroom means a desire or an effort to understand, to be understood and to get messages across. This is what Prof. Pit Corder called *Communicative Pressure.* What are the ways in

which we can bring about communicative pressure? There is one thing which we can do. We can think of problem solving activities. The learner, if he has understood the problem, will want to show that he has solved it. This is the sort of motivation that we should create. There are number of ways of bringing about communicative pressure. The learner must be exposed to situation in which he cannot but communicate. In such exposure the mind is occupied with making an effort to understand or get message across. (13)

PBL concentrates on such activities and methods to activate this communicative pressure in a learner.

ASSESSMENT AND ERROR CORRECTION

"According to Thom Markham "PBL offer teachers the opportunity to teach, observe, and measure the growth of real-world skills" (Markham, n.p)" PBL commends two types of assessments. Formal assessment by teacher, and continuous self assessment by learners themselves. As an approach that advocates self directed learning, self assessments by the learners often help them to reflect upon their research and synthesize new knowledge that contributes to their project. Self assessments are often made possible through different ways such a journaling, report writing, and group discussions.

Constant formal assessments are also equally pivotal in PBL, as it provides the teacher with essential feedback on the effectiveness of teaching method, materials, and tasks. It offers an insight in to whether the model has adequately contributed towards the realization of learning objectives. It also establishes an understanding of what needs further attention. Since assessment in a group activity becomes tedious, it is essential that the teacher draws up a rubric for assessment that records all components of the learning objectives. In certain cases, assessments also lead to planning of remedial programme for teaching. Such assessments can be formative, making note of each development or deterioration, leading to further action.

Assessment inevitably points out at the errors made by learners. Analyses of such errors are equally important in identifying the areas of weakness of the learner(s) and addressing it. It is also the responsibility of teacher to classify learner's error and guide them accordingly. The teacher must ensure to present the student with correct models as a part of their conversation than directly divulging in to rigid correction. This will only embarrass the learner in front of his peers, de-motivating his efforts to attempt at communicating. Hence, identifying the errors and correcting it must be carried out with utmost caution and sensitivity.

CONCLUSION

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) for students of English is a successful approach to learning that is highly beneficial in addressing the rapid technological changes, challenging global economic markets, and evolving workplace requirements. This emerging paradigm and the instructional strategies that accompany it encourage authentic language learning experiences and information literacy for English language learners. PBL is a multilevel approach to learning that incorporates relevance and complexity while strengthening critical and analytical thinking, and provides an opportunity for self-assessment and continuous improvement. PBL guides exploration, and students who learn using this model develop a sense of self-esteem and ownership for their work. Through the use of this model, opportunities abound for linguistic development coupled with acquisition of content area knowledge. (Boothe, et all)

The paper thus provides a comprehensive understanding of how project based learning helps tertiary level learners, in English language development. Various features of the method have been crucial and beneficial in attaining the desired result. If planned well and executed with caution and sincerity, PBL methods work best in capturing the attention of tertiary learners, providing a pathway to attain efficacious communicative skills as a means to English Language development.

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