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PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING: BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES FOR LEARNERS IN THE ESP CLASSROOM

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Rezumat

Învățarea bazată pe probleme (eng. problem-based learning) este un proces activ și interactiv, care dezvoltă studenților o mentalitate activă de învățare, ei fiind mai implicați în acest proces. Folosind învățarea bazată pe probleme, studenții își pot îmbunătăți abilitățile de rezolvare a problemelor, abilitățile de cercetare, abilitățile de învățare autodirijată și abilitățile sociale. Învățarea bazată pe probleme este eficientă pentru realizarea cursurilor de limbă engleză pentru studenți prin faptul că este implicată interacțiunea dintre studenți și un efort de înțelegere comună a unei probleme, participanții având un obiectiv comun și responsabilități comune și pentru că învățarea este un proces activ în care elevii își pot construi sau reconstrui propriile rețele de cunoștințe, într-un context dat de problemă. Acest articol își propune să studieze beneficiile, caracteristicile învățării bazate pe probleme și provocările în utilizarea PBL în clasele cu predarea limbii engleze de specialitate.

Cuvinte-cheie: învățarea bazată pe probleme, limba engleză pentru scopuri specifice, predare, abordare, probleme.

In the new orientations of education, the aspect of the interaction of the teacher with the student is a fundamental one. Also, as a consequence of the development of industrial society into the information society the teacher-centred learning environment was replaced by the learner-centred environment, in which the process of learning and not the product is emphasised. In this context, the need for a learner-centred educational system is evident, focusing on the level of development of its potential, applying appropriate techniques, strategies and approaches.

Analysing the techniques, strategies and methods used by the teachers to teach English for Specific Purposes to learners and in order to avoid passive learning, rote memorisation, poor learning strategies, and the translation of course materials into learners' mother tongue in order to learn English, the possibility of using and implementing Problem-Based Learning (PBL) methodology to teach English for Specific Purposes is considered. In this way, the present paper examines whether PBL is compatible with language teaching and determines the benefits that this methodology can bring to ESP and to the learners.

To start with, it is required to understand what Problem-based learning (PBL) represents. In this way, M. Savin-Baden and C.H. Major explain that PBL is a learner-centred cognitive approach to learning that is based on solving problems and which aims at teaching both knowledge and skills. [3].

D. Boud and G. Feletti stated that Problem based learning is an approach to structuring the curriculum which involves confronting students with problems from practice which provide a stimulus for learning [1].

PBL is also defined as "linking theoretical knowledge to practical application through the use of collaborative groups in which students are responsible for deciding what is to be learned" [6, p.348].

J. Moore mentions that PBL involves students exploring challenging, open-ended problems in small collaborative seminar groups where the lecturers take on the role as facilitators of learning [9].

L. Torp and S. Sage consider PBL as a focused, experiential learning organised around investigation and resolution of messy and real-world problems. Teachers use real-world problems as they coach learning through probing, questioning, and challenging students' thinking. PBL confronts students with a messy, ill-structured situation in which they assume the role of the stakeholder or "owner" of the situation. They identify the real problem and learn whatever is necessary to arrive at a viable solution through investigation. Additionally, students assume increasing responsibility for their learning, which increases their motivation and feelings of accomplishment, establishing a pattern to enable them to become successful life-long learners [4].

Collaboration is particularly useful when students seek to understand a complex problem, and the contributions of different students in terms of expertise and experience are integrated and valued. Hence, a student becomes an active learner, problem solver, and team player [17].

Problem Based Learning (PBL) which is a learning method based on the principle of using real-world problems as a starting point for the acquisition and integration of new knowledge appears to be a suitable approach or an alternative method to be implemented in the English language classroom in universities to enhance the teaching and learning of English [8].

The PBL method helps to create meaningful activities. When students work on solving problem cases or situations, the activities involved tend to trigger motivation and engagement [5]. Moreover, the problem solving process in PBL requires students to look for materials and to constantly relate what they read to what to do with the information [4]. This enables the students to integrate content knowledge with their knowledge of English.

As stated by J. Larsson, students in PBL classrooms improve in their social skills as they have more opportunities to practise using the language for authentic communication. Besides, students gain a deeper understanding when the vocabulary is encountered in real-world situations [14]. Thus, in order to effectively implement PBL, educators must learn to change roles as well as guide students through the learning process [12].

PBL not only enhances students' language proficiency through lots of language production opportunities, it also promotes various non-linguistic skills such as leadership skills, collaborative skills, critical thinking skills and problem-solving skills which would prepare students for future employment [10].

Furthermore, it is important to mention the benefits of PBL and to begin with, we state that PBL supports active learning. Therefore, in PBL, learners are engaged in learning. Unlike traditional approaches in which the student's role is limited to answering given questions, in PBL students are cognitively engaged in learning through a problem scenario. Thus, Problem-based learning is an active learning method based on the use of ill structured problems (i.e. not all the information is given) as a stimulus for learning [11]. In PBL, students have the opportunity to develop skills in reasoning and self-directed learning [13]. C.E. Hmelo-Silver declared that in PBL, students' learning centres on a complex problem that does not have a single answer [7, p.238]. As opposed to other methods of teaching in which the outcomes of students' activities are assessed as right or wrong, problems in PBL have no single answers.

Moreover, in PBL, the students explore the knowledge they need and are trained to become responsible for their learning. Unlike traditional methodologies, in PBL, students are active

learners who develop various learning strategies: cognitive, social, and affective. In PBL, students have no choice, but to develop responsibility, as they have to find themselves the information they need. They learn with the group during the tutorial and individually while looking for the information. They work in and outside the classroom. Just like in real life, they live with this problem until it is solved.

Additionally, in PBL students work in teams. M. Savin-Badin and C.H. Major explained that the word team implies that students are committed, cooperative, and dedicated to achieve a common purpose. The team in PBL is well organized. Also, students in small teams explore a problem situation, and, through this exploration, are expected to examine the gaps in their own knowledge and skills in order to decide what information they need to acquire in order to resolve or manage the situation that they were presented with [3].

Moreover, PBL learners develop more professional skills that are crucial for success in the workplace. In PBL, students learn when previous knowledge is activated, knowledge gaps are identified and new knowledge is accommodated, and, therefore, constructed. Students explore knowledge themselves in a meaningful way, bring information they have found to class, share it with their peers, and negotiate meaning. It allows them to process information as they are working with it at a very deep level. Also, students develop “problem solving skills” through exposure to real life problems similar to those they will encounter in their future field of work. At the same time, students work in teams and this helps everyone to work in a more open environment, encouraging communication and learning and getting things done in the most efficient manner [16, p. 558].

Besides, in PBL, many of the teacher’s traditional tasks are delegated to the learner and the teacher acts as a facilitator; s/he is no longer the source of information or the only decision-maker. C.E. Hmelo-Silver affirmed that, in PBL, the teacher/facilitator is an expert learner, able to model good strategies for learning and thinking, rather than an expert in the content itself. The facilitator scaffolds student learning through modelling and coaching, primarily through the use of questioning strategies. The author explained that the role of scaffolding is graded according to students’ experience. The more experienced they become, the less scaffolding they have. The facilitator has also to monitor the group process and encourage all team members to actively take part. S/he also has to induce students to assess their peers’ work and their own work [7, p. 245].

Also, this methodology enhances students’ autonomous learning and they become responsible for their own learning. Students develop the strategies and skills that make them life-long learners. The students who practice PBL will overcome the problem of learners’ dependency on teachers and passive learning.

In addition, we would like to mention that PBL focuses on students’ needs and intrinsic interest and develops intrinsic motivation as well. Promoting intrinsic interest will contribute to a more engaged, motivated, learning experience for students.

Another benefit is that PBL provides learners with the context needed to learn in a meaningful way, encourages co-operative learning, allows meaning negotiation, increases students’ motivation, and gives them the opportunity to agree and disagree. In a word, it provides all the conditions for language learning to take place at best. In addition, learners need to learn the language in the context of the field of their work and studies, and in PBL students have to work on a case that comes from similar situations that they would meet in their workplace or studies.

Here we can mention that enhancing students’ motivation plays a positive role on students’ learning. This is based on the effect of learners’ freedom to work on something they personally planned and thought was interesting, as opposed to being told what information to bring to class, read, and write.

On the other hand, PBL can be very challenging to implement, as it requires a lot of planning and hard work. The time needed for teacher planning, supervision and advice to learners is much greater than that required in conventional teaching. Also, teachers have to sacrifice their own free time to satisfy students' needs.

Another challenge faced when using this methodology is that, students are unable to differentiate between what might be important for them to learn. In this method, the student determines what he needs to know. Although the teacher may have considerable responsibility, in the beginning by providing the student with the necessary experience and guidance, it is expected that the student will eventually take full responsibility for his own learning.

Also, the most difficult challenge to overcome is that the teacher has to change the role from his/her traditional role and to act more of a facilitator instead. This role is critical, as the facilitator must continually monitor the discussion, selecting and implementing appropriate strategies as needed. As students become more experienced with PBL, facilitators can fade their scaffolding until finally the learners adopt much of their questioning role. Student learning occurs as students collaboratively engage in constructive processing. The dilemma for the facilitator is to provide affordances for this constructive processing [13, p. 23].

In addition, PBL can be very challenging as the students are supposed to take over many roles from the teacher. They engage in co-teaching with their peers and they are expected to have their own input and contribute to the lesson.

Another issue can appear concerning the assessment applied when evaluating learners. Students actively take part in assessments, whether self-assessment or the assessment of their peers. M. Savin-Badin recommended that the students get involved in the assessment process and learn how to perform evaluation and he states that one way of doing this, is to ask students to develop their own marking criteria, because they will then understand what the process of grading involves [2, p.111].

One of the problems which can appear with PBL in language teaching is that students tend to use their mother tongue, especially when they share the same language. In this respect, the teachers and the students have to do their best, so that the students do not lose the chance to communicate in the target language, and, therefore, miss the linguistic objective.

J. Mathews-Aydinli discussed two other problems: 1) students' inadequate linguistic level to cope with a problem can hinder the process, which he suggested could be sorted out through placing stronger and weaker students in the same group and pre-teaching some of the vocabulary necessary for the problem, and 2) students' interactions might be affected by the presence of the tutor [15, p. 5].

Another challenge is the uneven distribution and sharing of work among group members. Some learners are responsible, while others do not dedicate their time to learning or are passive learners. Some group members also do not show due respect to others. Students are of mixed abilities, and maintaining group motivation is indeed a challenge. Some students do not deliver what is expected of them, there is this academic and also language gap between them.

Another very important aspect to mention is the range of topics from the curriculum that needs to be covered. Compared to the traditional approach, PBL takes up a lot of time, which results in fewer topics being covered over a given period of time. The students need longer time to solve each given problems, unless the teacher wants to provide them with the solutions.

Another concern is the significance and relevance of the problem created or presented to the students referring to their field of study. In order to overcome the uncertainty and to ensure that the lesson plan match with what is intended, the teacher has to consult and discuss the topic with other English language teachers. At the same time, the teacher can train and prepare the

students for PBL. Designing good PBL questions is of great importance too, because the right questions can motivate students to learn.

In conclusion, it must be mentioned that the challenges we face nowadays and the requirements of the society make teachers use different and diverse means of teaching and teaching methodologies. PBL has proved to be a successful tool to a great extent, since it has a lot of benefits such as classroom interaction in language learning, raising student motivation, promoting learner autonomy, transforming the passively gained knowledge into an active one. In order to achieve these benefits, teachers must ensure that students understand the principles behind problem-based learning and recognize that they are participating in an effective learning process, even if it is unfamiliar to them. Apart from that, in order to overcome the challenges, teachers need support from their school/university, teachers and learners. Furthermore, the goals and benefits of PBL have to be communicated and understood by all interested people to motivate them to move towards a common goal.

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