

Project-based Learning as an Efficient Way of Studying English for Specific Purposes

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Abstract: This article is based on a Project-based Learning (PBL) experience which has been successfully developed during the last academic year, 2021-2022, with the students of the 2nd year of study, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Specialization Pedagogy of Primary School and Pre-school Education, in the context of promoting and sustaining innovative learner-centred methods. In fact, it was an attempt to move from theory to practice as a result of my recent participation within a project, financed by the EU through the Erasmus+ programme, the Restart for Education in a Digital Era through Project-Based E-learning (Restart4EDU). Therefore, the paper aims to share my first project-based learning (PBL) experience designed and implemented in an English as a Foreign Language (ELF) classroom, as a way of involving the students in an simultaneous process of learning language, content and skills. The learning outcomes did not take long to appear. On the one hand, the students received PBL very well. They acquire not only the 21st century skills, but also those related to language such as listening, reading, speaking, and writing skills, with their related components, vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation). Moreover, they come to use authentic language materials and improve communication competences. On the other hand, there were some challenges that should be considered before using this approach in the classroom. Further studies focusing on implementing PBL are needed, in particular on measuring its efficiency, and finding ways to overcome its disadvantages. Finally, PBL should become part of the university curriculum.

Keywords: *Project-Based Learning, English as a Foreign Language teaching, learner-centred method.*

How to cite: Lungu, I. (2022). Project-based Learning as an Efficient Way of Studying English for Specific Purposes. *Logos Universality Mentality Education Novelty: Philosophy & Humanistic Sciences*, 10(1), 45-52. doi: <https://doi.org/10.18662/lumenphs/10.1/63>

1. Introduction

Historically speaking, the theory of PBL has its roots in John Dewey's educational philosophy and the principle of learning through practical action with real purpose - "learning by practice" (learning by doing), and has advanced the idea of teaching and learning into a methodology known as "project-based learning", clarified by William Heard Kilpatrick. In 1918 he introduced the project method as a component of Dewey's problem method of teaching, in an article, *The Project Method*. According to his conception of "project-based learning," all teaching must begin with experience and be organized through productive work. Project pedagogy is then a pedagogical practice that can be qualified as active, producing learning by making a concrete production.

In the 21st century we are watching a revival of the project method under the auspices of project-based learning (Problem Based Learning - PBL). The Buck Institute for Education (BIE) in Novato, California, USA, offers the following definition for project-based learning: "Project-based learning is a systematic teaching method that engages students (pupils) in the process of skill formation and learning through a research process structured around authentic, complex questions and carefully designed tasks and products". http://www.bie.org/about/what_pbl).

"The main objective of project-based learning is to produce a product or artifact by students' working together in a team to execute the project" (Esch, 1998). "In PBL, by asking questions, cooperating with others, analyzing data, and communicating with each other, students can create a student-centred learning environment or learning community" (Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Marx et al., 1997; Erstad, 2002). „In practice, PBL has the potential to achieve a number of objectives and benefits. Lam (2004) suggests that PBL is used to the necessity for teamwork in solving complex problems.

Melo and Azevedo (2022) in a research showed that the PBL acted in the integral human formation of students, of the Higher Secondary Technical-Professional Education, in the following aspects: it allowed reflection and action about the community problems; it allowed an attentive look to the environment and environmental culture; it favored the understanding of research as a tool for the construction of scientific knowledge; it allowed the recognition of the need to use technological resources as a tool for the propagation of scientific Knowledge.

Simonton et. al (2021) consider that „the principles of this learning theory include that, knowledge is constructed and continually built on previous knowledge and experiences, students learn how to learn while engaged in learning the course content, students determine what new knowledge is required, and that learning is both active and social” (Simonton et. al, 2021). They also suggest „this means learning is not simply transmitted from teacher to student, but that students are required to seek out information and create connections to their personal lives” (Simonton et. al, 2021).

Three of the 21st century skills are crucial for. Project-based learning: 1. critical thinking and problem-solving ability, 2. cooperation, 3. self-organization ability (we manage our time and responsibilities independently). Critical thinking is the basic element of this method, students are encouraged to think critically, to ask questions, to look for answers, to overcome the obstacles encountered in solving the problem. Project-based learning presents the context, tools and tasks of the real world, so students are constantly connected to reality and better understand that everything they learn has applicability in real life and that learning always has a purpose. Project Based Learning teaches students to give and receive feedback to improve their process, but also the final product. They learn to organize their time and priorities so that the project is delivered completely and well done on time. The method involves work, involvement, collaboration and responsibility, and as the teacher frequently uses it, showing consistency, Project Based Learning becomes a way of life in that class, and students become more and more excited and more well prepared to face the real world. The challenge of this method is even greater when students have to work in a team.

2. PBL and EFL

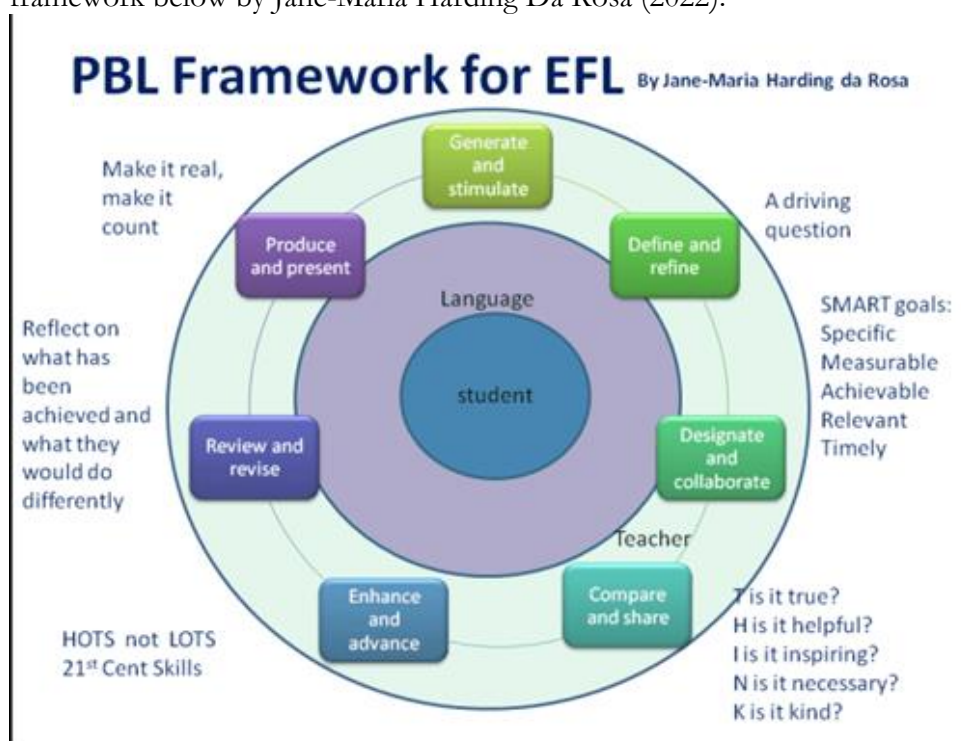
„Problem Based Learning (PBL) which is a learning method based on the principle of using real-world problems as a starting point for the acquisition and integration of new knowledge appears to be a suitable approach or an alternative method to be implemented in the English language classroom in universities to enhance the teaching and learning of English” (Legg, 2007). PBL plays an important role in developing learners’ English language for real-world purposes. In addition, it combines the language with the content of the specific discipline, in this case, Pedagogy of pre-school and primary school education.

From this point of view, PBL has been seen as an efficient way of students’ engaging in „simultaneous acquisition of language, content and

skills” (Beckett & Slater, 2005, p. 108). „PBL would, therefore, help language learners relate to the task, to the language in the learners’ communicative competence and make the language more relevant to their needs and enable them to communicate and understand the target language’s culture” (Hutchinson, 1996).

“The PBL method helps to create meaningful ESL activities. When students work on solving problem cases or situations, the activities involved tend to trigger motivation and engagement” (Bosuwon & Woodrow, 2009). “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” (Torp & Sage, 2002). Therefore, students that focus on developing communicative skills in a particular field or occupation, in other words, they can combine content knowledge of their field of study with their knowledge of English.

Recently, a few ELT practitioners have come up with a framework to make PBL applicable to ELT class. The best example is the PBL framework below by Jane-Maria Harding Da Rosa (2022).



Source: <https://oupeltglobalblog.com/tag/jane-maria-harding-da-rosa/> (2022)

3. Research methodology

Inspired by the PBL framework I have designed my own PBL framework but for an EFL class and for a target group of students in the 2nd year of study, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Specialization Pedagogy of Primary School and Pre-school Education (future kindergarten and primary school teachers).

Starting from the driving question, *What is representative for my teaching career?* the target group of students through their collaborative work, access to authentic sources such as university syllabus, scientific articles and Internet resources and through teacher's language input, has come to different topics turned into teams' projects (*1. The impact of junk culture on children's education, 2. Speech and learning disorders in the school-age children, 3. Universal children's day, 4. 21st century teacher, 5. The effects of media on children's education, 6. Inclusive classroom*). Since the learning objectives have been set-up in the form of - language proficiency - 21st century skills - awareness of CLIL (Content and Language-Integrated Learning) – and all the activity planning has been done, the actual research has been carried out - the development of the content elements, including making materials (the materials and equipment used, the method and the project plan) and leading to some amazing final products or learning outcomes embodied in PowerPoint presentations, YouTube videos, posters, questionnaires, illustrations, even methodological tools for identifying people at risk of diagnosing specific language and learning disorders.

4. Results

Based on their PBL experience, the students reportedly a positive perception in the way that they have been offered all the opportunity to investigate authentic topics and issues of interest to them, and in this way, they have felt actively involved in the learning process. They also demonstrate significant levels of motivation compared to traditional English classroom. Furthermore, students not only enhanced their language skills, but also their social communicative skills that require interpretation, critical thinking, negotiation, reasoning, and last but not least, cooperation and collaborative work.

In terms of the four basic language skills, productive skills have been developed, particularly speaking and writing through their presentations with the greatest impact on their confidence in using the language. This is important in language learning because the students have become unafraid

of making mistakes. As they continue to speak and use the language production, they will eventually improve their language accuracy.

5. Challenging PBL – some of classroom critical moments

In my work supporting PBL implementation I came across some critical moments but they can be turned into opportunities to strengthen PBL in classrooms.

1. Student motivation/engagement with the more independent nature of PBL.

2. Students lacking familiarity with peer and self-assessment (used to very teacher-centred methodology)

3. Providing the right amount of support that, on the one hand, encourages students to learn independently, and on the other hand, makes the completion of the task realistic.

4. Getting not-so-successful students interested; helping students organize great amount of info in a presentation and poor grammar when they start speaking without preparation.

5. Some disagreements or clashes may happen during teamwork, and as a result, it may be difficult for teachers to detect and realize these features in the implementation of PBL.

6. Conclusions

The obvious element of implementing PBL in an ESP classroom is the motivating element. Certainly, with PBL practices, students' boring school life becomes more attractive and livelier, and this thing motivates students a lot.

In EFL classes, PBL not only develops students' language proficiency through lots of language production opportunities, it also promotes various non-linguistic skills, so-called life skills. When we talk about skills for the 21st century, three are crucial for project-based learning: 1. critical thinking and problem-solving ability, 2. cooperation, 3. self-organization ability (time management and managing responsibilities independently).

Although there are many benefits to PBL, some pitfalls should be avoided before using this approach in the classroom, for example a considerable amount of work and background research that are required before classroom project implementation. If teachers are not properly trained or equipped with needed skills and abilities, they might not be able to

help their students learn key concepts effectively. That is why, project planning and supervision can be difficult for an inexperienced teacher

As the most important moment of PBL practice is the public presentation of the results when knowledge is demonstrated by putting them into practice, and the results are subject to external analysis and evaluation. It is hard to assess how much each learner contributes to a group project, which could mean that while some students are active and responsible, others are taking the easy way out and letting their peers do the hard work.

However, weighing the advantages and disadvantages of project-based learning applied through this experimental approach, one of the conclusions is that improvement of learning results is much greater than the small inconveniences that have arisen.

To conclude, project-based learning can become a way of life in the class while students can and should become more and more excited and more well-prepared to face the real world. The efficiency of PBL compared to traditional education also has to be studied further by quantitative methods.

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